

# **A CRYING SHAME: AFFECT, EMOTION and WELFARE RECEIPT IN NEW ZEALAND**

A thesis submitted in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Sociology  
at the University of Canterbury

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2017

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses attention on the welfare setting in New Zealand where welfare policy is administered and put into practice. Within the thesis, I analyse focus groups interviews with 64 New Zealand lone mothers receiving welfare in order to consider how participants made sense of their interactions with the national welfare provider *Work and Income New Zealand*. The research illustrates the emotional complexity of the welfare environment. This environment, in which the design and delivery of welfare provokes strong feelings, is steeped in emotion. In this thesis I draw upon recent writing in relation to “affect” to argue that, while negative feeling was the origin of many of the troubles the women in my research experienced in the welfare context, emotion also offered participants a way of responding to these difficulties.

Welfare mothers have long been framed by social and historical discourses that constitute them as a “social problem” and a threat to the moral order of this country. In New Zealand these discourses also link ethnicity to welfare dependency, and my analysis pays specific attention to the experiences of Māori and Pasifika women who took part in the research. In this thesis I argue that participants’ experiences of welfare receipt were dominated by the negative affect inherent in welfare discourse, and that this had a disciplinary function in the welfare environment. While negative affect shapes this thesis, my analysis also draws attention to other less predictable emotions that formed the “affective practices” (Wetherell, 2012) of research participants as they discussed their experiences of welfare receipt. My interest is in the way that emotion was reconfigured in participants’ narratives of these experiences. I argue that attending to affect and emotion can offer a way of understanding its role in the maintenance of dominant welfare discourses, and also a means of exploring possible sites for transformation.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my PhD supervisors Jane Maidment and Tiina Vares and for their ongoing support and encouragement over the years.

A very special thanks to Jim Anglem and Yvonne Crichton-Hill for their insightful comments, and to Jane Murray for her invaluable editing of the final version of this thesis.

I am particularly grateful for the contribution from focus group participants, and to Moana-o-Hinerangi and Telisia Moale for their assistance in conducting the interviews. I would like to thank the organisations that helped in recruiting participants, in particular Pacific Trust Canterbury, Single Women as Parents, Wellington Young Feminists, and the Auckland Women's Centre. There is also an organisation that I owe much to for helping recruit rural participants but cannot name in order to protect the identity of those who took part.

I am very appreciative of the funding provided through the Canterbury Doctoral Scholarship.

Finally I wish to thank family and friends for being so very patient with my absences during the final months of writing this thesis.

## Welfare and emotion

Not one to accept his predicament stoically, he was continually seeking grants from Work and Income to supplement his benefit. He wanted grants for food, housing and medicines. The world owed him a living (Van Beynen, 2016).

In September 2014, as I began this research, Russell John Tully was arrested for shooting and killing two staff members at a Work and Income New Zealand<sup>1</sup> office. Tully was homeless, a beneficiary, and had been trespassed from the offices for intimidating behaviour several weeks before the killings. News reporting of the shooting and subsequent trial focused attention on Tully's propensity to cause trouble for those around him. *Christchurch Press* reporter Martin Van Beynen, whose quote began this chapter, published several articles during the trial. His articles paint Tully as a man of little value to society; an unreasonable individual with an overdeveloped sense of entitlement who was constantly harassing Work and Income staff for unwarranted assistance. While Van Beynen refers in one article to the Disability Allowance that Tully received, he qualifies this with a description of Tully as "about 182 centimetres, six feet – and clear-eyed, he did not seem in bad health but complained of a skin complaint which affected his joints". Tully may well have said he was unable to work but, Van Beynen implies, this claim was questionable.

Van Beynen's portrait of Tully, while ostensibly highlighting his individual shortcomings, largely relies upon social discourses that constitute welfare

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<sup>1</sup> *Work and Income New Zealand* (hereafter Work and Income) is the national provider of welfare services in New Zealand and is part of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). The Ministry is a public service department responsible for advising the government on social policy, and providing social services in New Zealand. It is made up of three areas: policy, service delivery and corporate. Work and Income falls under MSD's service delivery area.



beneficiaries as lazy, immoral, and potential (if not actual) welfare cheats (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004; Edwards & Duncan, 1997; Hays, 2003; Murray, 1994; Standing, 1997; Taylor-Gooby, 2013). In welfare discourses the dependent beneficiary is contrasted with the independent worker citizen who does not believe that “the world owe[s] him a living”, but instead strives to contribute to society, in the process paying for his or her own “food, housing and medicines”. On any given day in the New Zealand media, stories about those on benefits similarly imply that poverty is a result of a lack of effort, capability, and morality (Beddoe, 2014; Beddoe & Keddell, 2016). Such rhetoric has solidified into what Tracy Jensen and Imogen Tyler (2015) have referred to in a British context as “anti-welfare common sense” that shapes the way that those in poverty are perceived, and the way that welfare policy is created and delivered.

Welfare is an emotionally charged subject in New Zealand. The negative emotion within welfare reform discourse gives it a strong rhetorical force.<sup>2</sup> Policy documents released by the New Zealand government in 2010 to announce welfare reforms were littered with emotive language condemning “long-term welfare dependence” and promising “welfare fraud crack downs” (New Zealand National Party, 2014; Welfare Working Group, 2011). The response from beneficiary advocates was no less heated. The reforms were slammed as “mean spirited, stigmatising, punitive, [and] degrading” (Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010). Following reports of the shooting at Work and Income, long-time welfare advocate Sue Bradford tweeted the inflammatory remark, “shocking news coming in of Work & [sic] Income shooting: awful, but a risk when office becomes front for brutal policies” (Bradford, 2014). Increased security measures implemented in response to the shooting were vehemently criticised by welfare advocate groups for “punish[ing] the poor” and Work and Income urged instead to attend to its “toxic culture” (Harrowell, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that labelling emotions “negative” or “positive” is not unproblematic. As Ahmed (2014) notes, emotions often termed negative may also have positive enabling effects. However, within this thesis I use the terms “negative” and “positive” to refer to the meaning ascribed particular emotions within normative discourses. Anxiety, shame, and anger for example are generally referred to as negative while joy, interest, contentment and love are examples of positive emotions.

The welfare environment in which the design and delivery of welfare clearly incites strong feelings across many factions is saturated with negative emotion.

This thesis focuses on the welfare environment and the way that it was experienced by groups of New Zealand mothers receiving Sole Parent Support: a benefit available to single parents or caregivers with one or more dependent children aged under 14 years. At the end of March 2017, 62,212 people were receiving Sole Parent Support. The majority of recipients were women (92%) and aged between 25-39 years old (Ministry of Social Development, 2017). Within this thesis I draw attention to the everyday practices and processes of welfare, and the way women receiving Sole Parent Support made sense of their interactions with the national welfare provider Work and Income New Zealand. I argue that these interactions were dominated by the negative affect inherent in welfare discourses, and that this had a disciplinary function in the welfare environment. In this opening chapter, I provide the context for the research. This includes: an outline of welfare provision in New Zealand, and in particular that relating to lone mothers; a consideration of the emotionally laden discourses that constitute beneficiaries and women parenting alone in New Zealand; and an explanation of why I have focused on emotion as a key analytic concept. The final section provides a chapter summary of the thesis.

### **A history of welfare provision in New Zealand**

Assumptions about welfare recipients are embedded within the creation of social policy. Those unable to support themselves have long been constituted as a social problem in New Zealand, and indeed a problem that the state has been disinclined to resolve. Since the colonisation of this country, welfare provision has reflected a reluctant offering by governments of benefits paid at low rates and accompanied by strict means testing (Cheyne, O'Brien & Belgrave, 2008). In this section I outline a history of welfare provision in New Zealand in order to provide a context for the discussion to follow.

New Zealand was formally settled from 1840 through the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, an agreement between Māori and the British Crown. Whereas Māori had well-established informal systems of welfare, the prevailing attitude to welfare that settlers brought with them from England was founded on the belief that to be poor was a moral failing and that helping those in poverty with income assistance would discourage hard work and lead to welfare dependence.<sup>3</sup> State welfare assistance was limited to the creation of laws enabling the generation of settler wealth through land acquired from Māori (Cheyne, O'Brien & Belgrave, 2008). Although such policy contributed to the wellbeing of many Pākehā<sup>4</sup> settlers, it did little to help alleviate the hardship of those who could not afford land. Furthermore the separation of Māori from their land significantly reduced many Māori to a state of poverty making it difficult to maintain traditional welfare arrangements (Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1986).

While a small number of means and asset tested welfare payments were introduced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, (e.g. an Old Age Pension in 1898, and a Widows' Pension in 1911), the welfare of New Zealanders was not systematically addressed through social policy until the 1930s when the Great Depression created mass unemployment in New Zealand and around the world (O'Brien, 2008). In response, Michael Joseph Savage's Labour Government passed the Social Security Act of 1938 offering a raft of entitlements such as an unemployment benefit, invalids and sickness benefits, universal superannuation, and a family benefit aimed at alleviating poverty through the delivery of social services (King, 2003; O'Brien, 2008). The title of Savage's biography *From the Cradle to the Grave* (Gustafson, 1986) gives an indication of the ideological underpinnings of the welfare state in New Zealand. In comparison to what had existed prior, the benefits offered were generous and comprehensive. This policy was premised on the basic

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<sup>3</sup> Spicker (1984) proposes that the English Poor Laws - legislation deliberately designed to deter the poor from seeking help - left a legacy of moral judgement and shaped the way that many English viewed the provision of welfare.

<sup>4</sup> Within this thesis I use the term *Pākehā* to refer to white New Zealanders of European origin.

tenet that the state had a responsibility to provide for those citizens who were struggling to provide for themselves.

This principle, and the government provision of welfare, remained largely unchanged for the next four decades until high levels of unemployment during the 1970s saw welfare policy begin to move away from state delivery of services and towards more targeted assistance (Boston, 1987; Humpage, 2011). In a significant ideological shift, welfare provision during the 1980s began to reflect the growing influence of neoliberalism on economic and social policy in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> The impact of this has seen governments ever since become progressively less willing to take responsibility for the continued provision of welfare, as they have increased pressure on beneficiaries to enter the workforce.

The effect of this ideological swing became particularly apparent in 1991 when, in what has been described as a “brutal assault on the welfare state” (Peters, Peters, & Freeman-Moir, 1992, p.133), the National Government reduced benefit rates and abatement levels, and amended the eligibility criteria of a number of benefits. These changes were accompanied by emotive discourses as beneficiaries, particularly sole parents, were judged to be at fault for their reliance on welfare (Lunt, O’Brien & Stephens, 2008). State spending stabilised after the Labour Party won the election in 1999, however, welfare benefits were not increased. Furthermore welfare policy was accompanied by an emphasis on participation in the labour market (Lunt, O’Brien & Stephens, 2008). The focus was on work as an answer to poverty, rather than welfare as a form of social protection; rhetoric which has continued to frame the provision of welfare ever since.

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<sup>5</sup> During the 1980s New Zealand, along with many other countries in the world, began to show the influence of neoliberalism in economic and social policy. Neoliberalism has become synonymous with an economic philosophy that advocates free trade, a free market and the reduction of government control over the economy (Harvey, 2005). It has come to be associated with the policies introduced by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States during the 1980s as processes were put in place to accelerate economic liberalisation. The principle that market exchange is a suitable benchmark for both economic and social activity has become the dominant mode of thought and practice throughout much of the world (Harvey, 2005). Since the 1980s, most Western countries have adopted some version of neoliberalism in the formulation of welfare policy.

The current National Government came to power in 2008 and has made significant amendments to the welfare system. Signalling the anti-welfare and disciplinary rhetoric that would be a feature of these changes, then Prime Minister John Key introduced National's new welfare policy with the statement that it would "give [beneficiaries] a kick in the pants when they are not taking responsibility for themselves, their family, and other taxpayers" (Key, 2010). In 2010, New Zealand Parliament passed the Social Security (New Work Tests, Incentives and Obligations) Amendment Act introducing work tests for sickness beneficiaries and for beneficiaries with dependent children over the age of six. In July 2013, three new main benefits were created: Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, and Supported Living Payment. These benefits require increased participation in the workforce for many full-time beneficiaries, and have been accompanied by sanctions for those failing to meet specified obligations.

### **Lone mothers and welfare in New Zealand**

This thesis focuses on women receiving Sole Parent Support. Previous welfare policy for women parenting alone in New Zealand placed an emphasis on the relief of poverty through regular income provision (Goodger, 1998). The focus of Sole Parent Support, however, is unrelentingly on work. According to the Ministry of Social Development website, Sole Parent Support assists "single parents and caregivers of dependent children get ready for future work, supports them to find part-time work and provides financial help through a weekly payment" (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.b). Financial assistance has been relegated to third in a list of policy objectives that clearly prioritises paid employment.

Historically women parenting alone in New Zealand, as in many Western countries, have been very vulnerable to poverty. Whereas at the time of colonisation Māori women had the support of traditional systems of welfare, settler women who were economically dependent upon men, faced extreme hardship in the event they were left to care for their children alone (Goodger, 1998). Financial support for single mothers was limited to charitable aid until 1911 when widows with dependent

children were able to claim a means-tested pension. Deserted wives with children were not able to receive this pension until 1936, and it was never made available to unmarried mothers. As helpful as the Social Security Act (1938) was for men and nuclear families experiencing poverty, it granted little relief for lone mothers other than a temporary emergency sickness benefit made available to unmarried mothers shortly before and after giving birth.

By the late 1960s, the number of women raising children alone was growing (Goodger, 1998; Hughes, 2005). This was largely due to two factors: an increase in women choosing to give birth outside of marriage, and rising rates of divorce and separation. The high risk of poverty faced by an increasingly large number of women saw the government introduce the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) under the Social Security Amendment Act (1973). The DPB began as an emergency benefit, replacing a discretionary emergency benefit granted on the basis of hardship and personal circumstance, and was offered to all lone mothers in New Zealand irrespective of past marital status. In 1978, the DPB became established as a means-tested welfare entitlement (Hughes, 2005).

Although acclaimed for enabling women with dependent children to leave abusive or unhappy relationships and survive financially, the introduction of the DPB did not mark the end of the division of lone mothers along moral lines. Shortly after the benefit was created, concerns began to be raised about high levels of demand. A Domestic Purposes Benefit Committee of Review was established amid fears that the provision of financial support to lone mothers was encouraging the breakdown of relationships and discouraging single mothers from offering their babies for adoption (Goodger, 1998; Hughes, 2005). The Committee subsequently recommended that payment be made at a reduced rate for the first six months.<sup>6</sup> The marginalisation of divorced or never-married mothers in social policy was further entrenched by the coexistence of a separate Widow's Benefit paid at a higher amount (Hughes, 2005). Despite the fact that the DPB offered lone mothers regular income relief, its design

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<sup>6</sup> The policy of paying the DPB at a reduced rate for the first six months continued until 1985.

was grounded in historical distinctions between deserving and underserving poor and carried with it the implicit accusation of culpability concerning a relationship breakdown (Goodger, 1998).<sup>7</sup>

Women receiving the DPB, like other beneficiaries, were significantly affected by the “brutal assault” on the welfare system in 1991 (Peters, Peters, & Freeman-Moir, 1992, p.133). These reforms, like the most recent changes to the welfare system, disproportionately impacted on women who had the added responsibility of raising children on their own. After the Government overhaul of the welfare system in 1991 women receiving the DPB faced a number of work-test obligations and began experiencing pressure to enter paid employment. The focus on work has intensified with the recent changes. Under the latest welfare reforms, women transferring to Sole Parent Support are required to fulfil a number of obligations in order to remain eligible for this new benefit. Beneficiaries receiving Sole Parent Support are compelled to look for part-time work when their child is five years old, and full-time work when their child reaches the age of 14 years. Mothers who have another child while receiving a benefit may be required to demonstrate that they are looking for part-time work of at least 20 hours a week when their youngest child reaches the age of one year. Other obligations include reapplying for the benefit every 12 months, accepting all offers of employment deemed suitable by Work and Income, and enrolling dependent children with health care providers and in approved childcare from the age of three years. Sanctions can be applied for those who fail to meet these obligations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Widow’s Benefit continued until 2013 when the Sole Parent Support benefit replaced all benefits offering provision to those caring for children under the age of 14 years.

<sup>8</sup> A sanction is a financial penalty and those receiving Sole Parent Support can lose up to 50% of their entitlements if they fail to meet one or more of their obligations. Mothers of children may be sanctioned if they, for example, are considered not to have demonstrated a commitment to looking for, or preparing to look for, work. Preparation for work can include attending work assessments, work experience, or training courses. A significant feature of the reforms has been the introduction of sanctions for breaches of social obligations such as failing to enrol children in child-care or with health providers. According to the Work and Income Policy and Procedures website, sanctions can also be applied if mothers or expectant mothers do not meet obligations such as taking part in budgeting, antenatal care or parenting programmes (Work and Income, n.d.a.).

In New Zealand's history to date, women parenting alone have had an ongoing struggle to negotiate entitlements against a backdrop of moral panic and recriminations, even during the four decades when welfare was promoted as a safety net for all New Zealanders. Although the introduction of regular state funded financial support provided some relief for lone mothers, it has generally been a disciplinary arrangement, conditional upon particular types of behaviours, and subjecting recipients to assessments of deservingness (Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010; Uttley 2000). Historically all policy introduced to support lone mothers has been targeted at those deemed to be in need, and deserving of assistance. The subsequent necessity to separate poor women into "deserving" and "undeserving" groups, has inevitably led to debates about where to draw boundaries.

### **Contemporary anti-welfare sentiment**

One of the arguments put forward in this thesis is that the way beneficiaries experience welfare receipt is inherently related to prevailing beliefs concerning welfare provision. Analysis of public opinion data offers a way of understanding these attitudes. Negative feeling in relation to welfare recipients in New Zealand, as in many other Western countries, has grown considerably over the past three decades.<sup>9</sup> Louise Humpage's (2008) analysis of public opinion data from 1993 to 2005 indicates that, despite ongoing support for state provision of welfare, there has been a reduction in tolerance for income redistribution policies and a significant increase in the number of New Zealanders who attribute poverty to laziness. This decrease in public support for those receiving targeted benefits is further emphasised in Humpage's (2016) analysis of New Zealand public opinion data

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<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that public attitudes towards welfare recipients in this country are similar to those in other Western countries with means-tested welfare benefits. For example based on analysis of survey data from 2423 respondents, and focus groups with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, a British report noted a widespread belief that welfare recipients are "undeserving" and are breaking entrenched societal values of reciprocity (Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney, 2012). Peter Taylor-Gooby's (2013) analysis of the 2011 British Social Attitudes Survey found that more than 60% of those surveyed believed benefit rates were too high. Taylor-Gooby's (2013) analysis of the 2009 survey found that only 9% of respondents believed that child poverty was due to inadequate parental income compared to 20% who associated it with parental use of drugs and alcohol and 15% with parental unwillingness to work.



following the 2008 financial crisis. Based on these studies Humpage (2016, p.96) concludes that public opinion in relation to welfare clearly reflects the values of neoliberalism advocating less government assistance and increased participation in the labour market.

As public support for welfare has declined, there has been a popular re-imagining of the welfare state as nurturing welfare dependency. This has been fuelled by anti-welfare rhetoric labelling welfare as the cause of social problems rather than a solution; the primary problem for governments to resolve is not poverty but welfare dependency (Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010; Jensen & Tyler, 2015). In the context of the United Kingdom, Jensen and Tyler (2015) have outlined the way that anti-welfarism has become established through the constitution of a number of “intensely affective” figures mobilised as symbols of welfare dependency in the public imagination. Women have disproportionately appeared amongst these figures (Tyler, 2008).<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom, the “grotesque and comic” figure of the “chav mum” is used to vilify poor young white mothers (Tyler, 2008, p.17). In the United States, negative depictions of poor black women work to produce the figure of the “welfare queen”: a woman whose most prominent qualities are her rampant fertility, laziness and dishonesty (Hancock, 2004). New Zealand researchers have similarly identified discourses framing women on welfare as bad mothers and a drain on social resources (Ferguson, 2013; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Longhurst, Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012; Patterson, 2004; Todd, 2008). Uttley (2000, p.451) has identified the figure of the “sexually irresponsible lone mother” amongst these discourses. As in the United States, this figure is also ascribed brown skin so that ethnicity has become linked with welfare dependency (Beddoe, 2014; Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1986).

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<sup>10</sup> Women who receive welfare are constituted through moralising and disciplinary discourses that are uniquely gendered. Although all beneficiaries are negatively constituted in welfare discourses that link shame to poverty and welfare dependence, numerous studies have demonstrated that lone fathers do not face the same condemnation of their parenting skills or morality (Barker, 1994; DeJean, McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

These affective figures both produce and mediate anti-welfare sentiment (Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2008). Tyler (2008) has identified disgust as a reaction to welfare mothers' alleged profligate breeding and inadequate parenting, and anxiety that their very existence depletes public funds and spreads economic insecurity. Indeed disgust has often been identified as a feeling provoked by those who receive state welfare (Hancock, 2004; Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012; Thompson & Hoggett, 2012). Disgust directed towards lone mothers serves to validate measures taken to contain their moral irresponsibility and fiscal recklessness. Lone mothers – particularly those who are not white – are constituted as a “social problem” and a threat to the moral order of society in New Zealand. Disgust at their continued dependency upon welfare justifies the implementation of punitive welfare policies.

### **Neoliberal citizenship: Motherhood and work**

In welfare discourses the figure of the lone mother is implicitly contrasted with that of the self-sufficient industrious neoliberal citizen. Dependence and unemployment are disgusting, but independence and work arouse positive emotions. Within neoliberal societies particular citizen characteristics are essential to the efficient working of the economy and hence society as a whole (Skeggs, 2004). Neoliberal citizens are lauded for economic participation in society, contributing to the economy through taxation and consumption, and demonstrating autonomy and free will as independent self-governing agents (Wilkins, 2014). Andrew Wilkins (2014) proposes emotion and feeling can be considered as discursive resources intrinsically related to neoliberal governance. In the same way as there is disgust directed towards those who do not demonstrate neoliberal citizenship, there is much positive affect associated with its achievement.

Women are able to attain neoliberal citizenship as active participants in the labour market, or as mothers producing and raising future neoliberal subjects (Giles, 2014; Lister, 2002; 2003). In contemporary Western societies, neoliberal mothering is related to women's performance of “intensive mothering”: a term coined by Sharon

Hays (1996) to draw attention to culturally informed practices of a demanding hands-on style of raising children. Intensive mothering involves rigorously attending to children's physical, moral, social, emotional and intellectual development. Discourses of mothering in New Zealand, like many Western countries, subsequently link the amount of time spent with children to good parenting (Duncan & Edwards, 1997; May, 2008; Perrier, 2013, p.657).<sup>11</sup> New Zealand mothers who receive welfare are therefore pressured to perform in conflicting ways: as neoliberal citizens with a responsibility to be financially independent of the state, and as mothers with an obligation to raise and care for their children.<sup>12</sup> These women must somehow balance the demands of the ongoing restructuring of welfare policy, with its increasing pressure to enter the workforce, and cultural expectations related to hands-on "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996; Reich, 2014).

Research has highlighted the difficulties that this contradictory discursive positioning creates in the lives of many welfare mothers in an international context (Cook, 2012; Cook, Davis, McKenzie & Smyth, 2009; Cook & Noblet, 2012; Gardiner, 2000; Featherstone, 2006; Standing, 1997; Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2010) and in New Zealand (Baker & Tippin, 2002; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Patterson, 2004; Todd, 2008). This research highlights a tension between what many lone mothers believe is their role as a parent, and the priority given to work in welfare policy. In a New Zealand context qualitative research with lone mothers has found that the precedence women give to mothering is often ignored in welfare policy with its increasing emphasis on paid employment (Baker & Tippin, 2002; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Patterson, 2004; Todd, 2008). This research notes that the way many lone mothers understand their parental responsibilities limits their willingness to participate in the labour market despite increasing pressure to do so from the state.

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<sup>11</sup> It is possible for mothers to outsource this time, by paying other people to care for children (Vincent, 2017). This does however require access to economic resources.

<sup>12</sup> Although women in general experience these pressures, they are particularly challenging for mothers who lack adequate economic and social resources (Skeggs, 1997; Vincent, 2017).

Carol Vincent, Stephen Ball, and Annette Braun (2010, p.123) evocatively describe emotionally laden social discourses as “surg[ing] and seeth[ing] around the lives of working class mothers”. Welfare discourses constitute beneficiaries as immoral, dishonest and bad mothers. Neoliberal citizenship discourse constitutes women as workers with a responsibility to contribute to the economy. Dominant understandings of mothering propose that good mothers should invest extensive amounts of time and energy in caring for their children. These discourses open lone mothers up to criticism “about being seen as the wrong sort of person” (Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2010, p.126). This person is either a welfare mother who is inherently a bad parent and citizen, or a working mother whose employment responsibilities preclude her from meeting cultural expectations of parenting. This inevitably places lone mothers under considerable pressure as they attempt to meet the demands of good mothering and good citizenship despite the constraints inherent in these positions. These complex formations of emotionally loaded discourses shape the way women feel about welfare, work and parenting.<sup>13</sup>

### **(Re)formulating the research question**

Karen McCormack (2004, p.356) contends “the words of welfare are powerful”. Discourses of welfare and work not only influence how women who receive welfare feel about themselves, but also how these women are perceived by others. Such discourses are also inherent in welfare policy. This thesis focuses on the point where policy is put into practice: in the administration of welfare entitlements. Previous research with beneficiaries in New Zealand has highlighted the difficulties welfare recipients encounter as they move through the process of collecting their benefits. A report funded by the Families Commission argued that social stigma associated with welfare receipt in New Zealand was increased by “negative stereotyping and judgemental, moralising attitudes towards DPB recipients” by Work and Income staff

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<sup>13</sup> Research in the United Kingdom has emphasised that lone mothers are often driven more by their parental responsibilities and their roles as mothers than by economic motivation (Duncan & Edwards, 1997; Haux, 2013). Duncan and Edwards (1997) argue that women who do not undertake paid employment are more likely to hold views about the incompatibility of paid work with motherhood.

(Cowley & Blair, 2007, p.7).<sup>14</sup> A research project examining discrimination experienced by people with mental illness related overwhelmingly negative interactions between participants and staff at Work and Income (Peterson, Pere, Sheehan & Surgenor, 2004). A study of resilience among Pākehā, Māori and Pasifika sole parent families (Waldegrave et al., 2011) reported findings of “negative and stereotyping interactions” from staff at Work and Income. A recent report into the legal needs of beneficiaries concluded “negative experiences ... and stigma attached to being on a benefit overwhelmingly permeated [client] interactions with the benefit system” (Morton, Gray, Heins & Carswell, 2014, p.9).

I became particularly interested in the difficulties welfare recipients experienced in their everyday interactions with Work and Income while working on this latter research project (Morton et al., 2014). Research participants told me about the challenges they encountered within the Work and Income environment identifying problems with processes, practices, and the actions of staff members. We wrote about this in the report but as our focus was on the legal needs of beneficiaries, we did not engage with the finding in any detail. I subsequently found that other research projects in New Zealand similarly only touched on the subject as it related to other aspects of the lives of welfare recipients. Research with lone mothers on a range of subjects has highlighted their ongoing negative experiences within the Work and Income setting but has not focused specific research attention on this environment (Baker, 2004; Baker & Tippin, 2002; 2004; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Tippin & Baker, 2002; Todd, 2008). I decided therefore to examine the way a group of lone mothers experienced the everyday practices and processes of welfare.

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<sup>14</sup> These findings were not received favourably by either the Families Commission, which chose not to publish the report (Taylor, 2007 June 9), or the then Minister for Social Development and Employment David Benson Pope who expressed concerns in Parliament about the methodology employed (Benson Pope, 2007). The Minister was concerned with the lack of generalisability of the results but did not identify any substantial methodological flaws. Generalisability of results is not an aim of qualitative research. The report includes very detailed quotations from participants that provide a level of transparency to the findings and support the authors’ argument that participants had predominantly negative experiences with welfare administrators.

My starting point for this thesis was stigma. The literature both international and local has described the design and implementation of means-tested welfare as stigmatising. International research has drawn attention to the ways in which the welfare environment is humiliating and degrading for clients. Research in the United States and Britain has identified the stigma associated with welfare provision in those countries, in particular the enforcement of eligibility and compliance and a client's expectation that they will be treated badly by those managing these programmes (Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney, 2012; Seccombe, James & Walters, 1998; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). This research contends that stigma is a key feature of the administration of many state welfare programmes illustrated by disrespectful treatment of clients, long wait times, and a lack of privacy concerning personal details. My intention at the outset of this research was to focus on the administration of welfare in New Zealand, paying attention to the way in which participants made sense of the welfare environment and their interactions with Work and Income, and considering the way that stigma was implicated in this sense-making.

Tyler (2013; 2015) defines stigma as a system of valuation and also as an instrument of coercion. Talk of value featured throughout the research participants' discussions. Analysis of these discussions also indicated that participants experienced the processes and practices at Work and Income as having a coercive or disciplinary effect. As I worked through the analysis, however, I began to notice how much emotion was implicated in the participants' narratives of their experiences of receiving welfare. In considering the interplay between emotion, value, and coercion I turned to literature emphasising the relationship between affect and power (e.g. Ahmed, 2012; Wetherell, 2012). Margaret Wetherell (2012, p.16) for example proposes that "power works through affect, and affect emerges in power". Engaging with this work facilitated the refocusing of attention in my analysis. I reformulated my research question in order to consider the way participants were affected by their experiences of welfare. Rather than focusing on the way that the women experienced welfare as stigmatising, I began to analyse the broad emotional configurations that emerged in the women's talk of the everyday practices and

processes of welfare. In shifting focus my intention was to draw attention to the social implications of affective patterns in the welfare context.

### **A turn to affect**

In focusing analytic attention on affect this thesis has been informed by writing exploring the relationship between the body and emotions<sup>15</sup> (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Hemmings, 2005; Massumi, 2002; Wetherell, 2012). Authors of this literature have paid attention to theorising corporeal responses and imbuing social analyses with what Wetherell (2012, p.2) has referred to as “psychosocial texture”. My approach within this thesis engages with the “affective turn” (Clough, 2008) considering flows of affect within the welfare context. Yet while I consider emotion as a reaction that is often intense and unpredictable, I situate my analysis firmly within a discussion of the social and political. I position my discussion of emotion within the social context of the research, and the wider ideological context of welfare provision in New Zealand. In doing so I engage with the intensity of affect, and its capacity for multiple meanings, while also considering that feelings and emotions are shaped by social discourses and practices.

My analysis in this thesis examines the way groups of women made sense of their interactions within the welfare environment where negative emotion “surges and seethes” (Vincent, Ball, & Braun, 2010, p.123) around them. As I have noted above, there is much negative emotion expressed in relation to those who receive welfare. Disgust and anxiety are two emotions that the literature associates with welfare mothers. Knowing that they are objects of such ill feeling, not surprisingly, provokes shame amongst those unable to support themselves independently of the state (Chase & Walker, 2013). In this thesis I highlight the way that negative affective formations shaped participants’ accounts of negotiating welfare entitlements,

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this thesis I often use the terms affect and emotion broadly and interchangeably. Rather than distinguishing between the two I draw from Greco and Stenner (2008, p.12 italics in original) in considering “there is more to emotion than *talk about emotion*”. My usage of affect aligns with Wetherell’s (2012, p.4 italics in original) definition as “*embodied meaning making*” ... something that could be understood as human emotion”. Similarly I use the term emotion as Ahmed (2014, p.208) has done to refer to “bodily processes of affecting and being affected”.

proposing that these configurations were the origin of many of the troubles the women in my research experienced as they moved through the process of collecting their welfare entitlements.

Within this thesis I also draw attention to other less predictable reactions that formed the women's "affective practices" (Wetherell, 2012) as they moved through the process of collecting their welfare entitlements. I analyse the way that the women taking part in the research spoke of reacting emotionally to difficulties they encountered during this process. Many of the participants described feeling shame, but they also described feeling many other things. As Alison Jaggar (1989) has argued people do not always experience emotion in expected ways. In highlighting a range of affective responses I draw attention to the diversity of emotion implicated in welfare receipt. This thesis examines both the patterning and the irregularity of emotional reactions in the welfare environment, and considers how the reconfiguration of emotion may offer women who receive welfare a way of responding to the difficulties they encounter in that context.

Any discussion of emotion in relation to women brings gender categorisations into play. As Jaggar (1989) has argued, women within Western society have long been considered to be innately more emotional than men. This characterisation operates within discourses that privilege rational thought and behaviour over demonstrative expression. A rhetoric of female emotionality is set in opposition to men's rationality: those who are emotional (women) are cast as irrational and weak because they purportedly cannot control their emotions (Lutz, 2008). Yet this places women in the impossible situation whereby in expressing emotion they run the risk of being interpreted according to the "pathological 'emotionality' of femininity" (Ahmed, 2014, p.170). Such a reading casts their emotion as irrational and invalidates their affective responses.

In contrast, this thesis argues that intense feelings can be coherent reactions to social situations. I offer a critique of common welfare practices that provoked strong emotional reactions amongst the research participants. By problematising such



practices I propose that emotion can be both intense and rational. I draw from Jaggar's (1989) article *Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology* in arguing that emotion is unavoidable in the reasoning process and, moreover, that attending to emotion in research can potentially offer critical insights. Focusing critical attention on emotion, Jaggar (1989) argues is a form of political practice. Highlighting the emotion surrounding interactions in the welfare environment facilitates an understanding of how it feels to receive welfare and challenges the anti-welfare rhetoric accompanying recent welfare reforms in New Zealand.

### **Chapter summary**

My research is framed by a number of theoretical perspectives that I outline in Chapter Two. The chapter begins with a consideration of the economic rationality that has come to dominate the provision of welfare. Utilising the work of philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault's (2008) work on biopower and governmentality I consider the way in which the performance of neoliberal citizenship involves both economic rationality and emotional response. I draw attention to the "emotional struggle" involved in practicing neoliberal citizenship. A consideration of this struggle leads on to an examination of the role of emotion in relations of power and the response that emotion offers within these interactions. The chapter highlights the work of a number of "affect theorists" (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Greco & Stenner, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Massumi, 2002; Probyn, 2005, Wetherell, 2012) and the contribution they have made for research concerned with theorising emotional responses.

In Chapter Three I focus on the methodological choices I made and the issues I encountered as I moved through the research process. I discuss my decision to use focus groups, the way I recruited participants, and decisions and strategies that I drew upon in completing the research. The chapter details how I went about engaging Māori and Pasifika women in the research. As a Pākehā researcher I was aware that I needed to carefully plan a research project that was to include non-Pākehā participants. The chapter outlines how I came to form a cultural steering

group to assist me throughout the research process. I also reflect on unexpected issues that arose in the groups with Māori and Pasifika women: specifically in relation to my own Pākehā ethnicity. In outlining some of the challenges I encountered in the research process my aim was to engage with my role in the co-construction of the research knowledge. My impact on the research design and execution was influenced by factors such as my education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and I wanted to make this influence as visible as possible. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the data analysis process.

Chapters Four to Eight explore the “talk” of the women who participated in the research. Chapter Four provides context to the thesis by examining how discourse and emotion work together to create a perception of social value. In the chapter I utilise the metaphor of an affective economy to consider how affect circulates and attaches to individuals in ways that has both positive and negative value (Ahmed, 2014). The chapter considers how participants attempted to counter the negative affect associated with the receipt of welfare, with positive affect that they accumulated in other areas of their lives. Beverley Skeggs (2004; 2011) proposes that those without access to the economic resources necessary for creating “person value” may attempt to generate new forms of capital. Notions of citizenship and motherhood appeared to have value for many of the participants, and in the discussions they often focused on these aspects of their identity. Ultimately, however, this chapter emphasises the difficulty of negotiating positive affective value while on a benefit.

My analysis in Chapter Five focuses on the Work and Income context. The chapter is an analysis of participants’ accounts of daily encounters within Work and Income offices. I examine the way that participants spoke about being affected by the policies, the practices and the caseworkers of the organisation, and I consider how these experiences coalesced to form an emotional impression of place. The women described requirements to reveal personal details of their lives; they spoke about not being informed of their entitlements, and of being given incorrect information; they talked about having to wait for extended lengths of time for appointments;

they were critical of individual caseworkers who, many contended, withheld information about their entitlements. Within this chapter I argue that the affective resonance within Work and Income offices was particularly unpleasant for the research participants, and that this is a result of the way that welfare practices are managed within these spaces.

In considering the way research participants responded to the negative affect identified in Chapters Four and Five, it is possible to see broad patterns of shame and anger that are the focus in the sixth chapter in this thesis. In Chapter Six, I explore the way emotion was reconfigured as the women responded to the shame that is an intrinsic part of the welfare environment. This chapter introduces the notion of “affective practice”: a focus on “the emotional as it appears in social life” (Wetherell, 2012, p.4). It considers the way that shame metamorphosed into tears and anger. While the women talked about crying often at Work and Income, they spoke of having to control their anger for fear of losing out on entitlements. In this chapter I argue that accounts of tears and anger enabled participants to rationalise their feelings, and form a collective response to the shaming experience of receiving welfare.

In Chapter Seven I focus on the laughter that featured often in the groups as the women used humour to frame their narratives. I examine the way that humour and laughter offered the participants a release from the tension of talking about difficult situations at Work and Income; and ultimately how it enabled them to reinterpret these situations. I argue that the humorous retelling of distressing events encouraged the women to view themselves from a different perspective. In considering laughter as “affective practice” (Wetherell, 2012), I position it as a reaction to treatment by welfare caseworkers, and to the administrative practices the women encountered at Work and Income.

Chapter Eight, the final analytic chapter, specifically highlights the experiences of Māori and Pasifika women in the research. In the other four analytic chapters, I focus on the similarities in the women’s experiences of welfare receipt. New

Zealand, however, is a country shaped by the legacy of colonisation where outcomes for Māori and Pasifika people are generally far less positive than for Pākehā (Marriott & Sim, 2015). In this chapter I discuss the way that discourses of race have become fused with those of poverty linking ethnicity to welfare dependency. The negative affect associated with welfare receipt appeared to be amplified for non-Pākehā women in an environment where social and historical notions of value are associated with ethnicity. Chapter Eight highlights the way that the racialisation of welfare receipt further disadvantages Māori and Pasifika women in the affective economy of welfare. Above all it emphasises the complexity of negotiating value within the welfare environment.

Chapter Nine concludes my thesis and considers some of the practical implications of the research. The chapter draws attention to the theme of power that runs throughout this thesis. It examines the way that affective formations have become established within the New Zealand welfare environment highlighting the material consequences of this for the research participants. The chapter also emphasises the transformative potential of emotion as it offered participants a way of responding to their experiences of welfare and, at times, a different way of feeling about these events.

## **Welfare discourse and the turn to affect**

This chapter brings together a number of the theoretical perspectives that inform this thesis. It begins with a discussion of the work of philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault paying attention to the relevance of a number of his ideas and theoretical terms for my research. My approach in this research draws upon poststructuralism as informed by Foucault. This thesis is shaped by the view that our values and beliefs, social practices and the subject positions available to us are all constituted through discourse. From this perspective, discourses operate at both the conscious and unconscious level working to produce meaning as they reinforce notions of common sense and our sense of self.

This chapter considers the writing of Foucault, and a number of theorists who have engaged with his work, in relation to discourse, subjectivity, power, and resistance. Foucault drew attention to the dominant discourses that regulate the lives of populations in modern societies. He also focused attention on the institutional effects of discourse and its role in the administration of populations. This aspect of his work is very relevant to this thesis, and the chapter includes a discussion of biopower and governmentality, focusing on the economic rationality that has come to govern all aspects of modern life. Foucault's (2008) contention that both our social and our economic lives are managed by a neoliberal regime of truth has much significance for this thesis. While the emphasis in Foucault's (2008) work is on the rationality of this management process, I also draw attention to the emotional effort involved in becoming a socially responsible citizen. The interplay between economic rationality and emotions frames this thesis.

Key to my discussion of this interplay is the notion of affect as theorised in literature that has emerged across the humanities and social sciences exploring the relationship between the body and emotions (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Clough, 2002; Greco & Stenner, 2008; Hemmings, 2005; Massumi, 2002; Probyn, 2004; 2005, Wetherell, 2012). The emphasis on emotion in this writing is intended to broaden the possibilities of social research through paying attention to embodied responses to social actions. It is this perspective that informs this thesis: a consideration of the way lone mothers receiving welfare were moved or affected by their experiences of welfare provision. This chapter synthesises the theorising of affect with the work of Foucault in order to contextualise key ideas developed throughout this thesis.

### **Discourse: Formations and practices**

In Chapter One I highlighted a number of discourses that shaped participants' experiences of welfare receipt. A poststructuralist approach provides a way of framing a discussion of the constitutive role of such discourses. Foucault proposed that language does not represent reality, but produces it. Discourse, in Foucault's writing, refers to language and language formations that cohere around concepts and practices. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) referred to discourses as systems of thought comprised of ideas, values, beliefs and practices.

Foucault's writing on discourse is helpful for considering what constitutes valid knowledge within a specific setting, how this knowledge comes into being, and the functions and consequences it has in any given situation. Discourses are a means of constituting knowledge: they can be understood as "language in action" or the way in which we utilise language in order to make sense of the world (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000, p.31). A poststructuralist approach to research up of two aspects: it involves retrospectively understanding how meanings are constituted through discourse, and is concerned with understanding the ongoing construction of reality through discourse (Jäger & Maier, 2009). Rather than focusing specifically on what

people say, Foucauldian analysts are interested in how they come to say these things and the effect of this language. In other words they are interested in the construction of discourses within a society and the way in which these shape the “ways-of-being” available for people (Willig, 2013, p.117).

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault (1972) wrote about discursive formations and practices. Foucault theorised discourse as specific to certain groups and historical eras. Discursive formations are patterned around the broad ideas or concerns of a particular time. These formations, Foucault (1972) argued, help us organise our ideas, attitudes and beliefs into language. The term discursive formation therefore refers to the systems of thought that make language possible. For Foucault (1972) discursive formations illustrate the discursive links connecting the broad changes that occur throughout different time periods.

The systems of thought that constitute neoliberalism are an example of a discursive formation. As discussed in the previous chapter, we are living in a period dominated by neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism advocate free trade, a free market and a reduction in state intervention. It promotes the expansion of economic values into all areas of modern life. Neoliberalism has had a significant influence on the delivery of welfare services in New Zealand since the 1980s. Over time the language of welfare has shifted from proposing poverty be alleviated through the delivery of social services to encouraging those on welfare into paid employment. Discourse constructing welfare dependency as a problem, and endorsing the need to move people off welfare, rationalises itself through the language of economics. The language of economics is similarly employed in other areas for example, the promotion of tax cuts, and the provision of health and education services.

Wetherell (2012, p.56) terms discursive formations as “big discourse”. This is contrasted with the everyday language of discursive practice. Foucault (1972, p.54) described discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. These practices, in Foucault’s writing, refer to the way we draw upon historically and culturally defined sets of rules to construct a subject. Such rules are

not officially sanctioned policies but rather directives that enable us to make particular statements. Foucault (1972) wrote:

What we have called 'discursive practice' ... must not be confused with the expressive operation by which an individual formulates an idea, a desire, an image; nor with the rational activity that may operate in a system of inference; nor with the 'competence' of a speaking subject when he constructs grammatical sentences; it is a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function. (p.117)

Discursive practices are “rules for the production of statements, determining not merely what can and cannot be said at one moment, but also—and more importantly—what it is possible to say” (Buchanan, 2010, p.135). They are the means through which social meaning is produced and understood, systems of defining and constituting reality.

Discursive practices come together to produce difficult to shift social configurations (Wetherell, 2012). In relation to welfare, discursive practices could include general groups of statements related to welfare provision. They could also include the language available to describe those on welfare (that which separates those who receive welfare from other people), and the processes and procedures that welfare recipients have to negotiate in order to claim welfare payments. To be able to accuse someone of “welfare dependency” necessitates that the concept of welfare dependency exist as a notion, and that it be associated with a certain category of person. The meaning associated with the term “welfare dependency” in New Zealand in 2017 is specific to this point in time and to this cultural context.



## **Foucault and the subject**

In his earlier writing Foucault (1972) was concerned with the ways in which discursive practices determine what counts as truth and constitute subjectivity. How we understand ourselves depends on the discourses we have available to us at a certain point in time. A Foucauldian interpretation of subjectivity emphasises that it is dynamic. We respond to different discourses, as well as to events around us. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault (1972) wrote:

Discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. (p.56)

In this thesis I examine the social discourses available to lone mothers on welfare in New Zealand, focusing on how certain subjectivities are more readily available in specific contexts, and how discourses work to produce multiple subject positions (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). The Foucauldian notion of a dynamic subjectivity encouraged me to consider the ways in which participants constituted themselves in both the focus group context and the Work and Income environment.

Subjectivity, according to Chris Weedon (1996, p.32), refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world”. Weedon’s (1996, p.108) interpretation of Foucauldian subjectivity, proposes that its constitution comprises an individual’s “mind, body and emotions”. This all-encompassing notion considers that discursive practices not only shape our individual subjectivities, but also determine the way we feel about these. Our emotions are not independent of discursive formations and practices but are in fact constituted by them. Discourses suggest how we should feel about ourselves and others, and it is through language that we define our feelings. Similarly as individuals may be the sites of multiple and conflicting subjectivities, feelings in relation to subjectivity can also be contradictory. This perspective is very important to my thesis as I consider the various ways that

welfare recipients constitute themselves through the discourses available to them, and the emotional responses this can provoke.

In his later work Foucault (1982, p.108) became progressively more interested in the negotiation involved as "a human being turns him or herself into a subject". This negotiation was apparent in the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* in which Foucault (1978; 1985; 1986) considered changes in discursive practices over time in relation to sexuality. The focus in *The History of Sexuality* was on discourses of sexuality and how these constitute categories of subjects through "the taint of abnormality" (Foucault, 1978, p.4). Foucault (1988, p.17) described his endeavours in these three volumes as an attempt to answer, "how had the subject been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what was forbidden?" This was, he proposed, a question of the relationship between self-discipline and an individual's sense of self. In the afterword to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's analysis of his work, Foucault (1982, p.214) described subjectivity in relation to the "modern state" which, he argued, assimilates individuals on the condition, that their "individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns".

Notions of subjectivity as theorised in *The History of Sexuality* are relevant to my research in several important ways. In tracing the way that sexuality has shifted from describing what people do to who people are, Foucault demonstrated how individuals in modern societies become categorised by their acts. Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000) explain the significance of this:

Using people's sexuality to classify their subjectivity is an important move, because it focuses attention on the person, rather than the act, and it establishes the grounds for people to be understood and explained as particular types of being, in a particular relation to themselves, their society and their norms. (p.140)

This has important implications for understanding the way that a reliance on welfare benefits in New Zealand has come to be associated with dependency and poor

parenting. A women receiving Sole Parent Support, for example, is constituted in a certain way: she is not simply a mother who receives a welfare benefit, she is a beneficiary. The act of receiving welfare payments constitutes her subjectivity.

While in Foucault's (1972) earlier writing he seemed to imply that we have little agency in relation to our own thoughts and knowledge, in *The History of Sexuality* he drew attention to the ways in which people actively negotiate subjectivity and demonstrate a capacity to challenge and resist structures of power. In relation to the subject in Foucault's later work, Weedon (1996) explains:

Although the subject in post-structuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available.  
(p.121)

This theorising of the subject as having the capacity to critically think about and respond to their discursive positioning is integral to this thesis. My research examines the way that participants were constituted through discourse, but also the way they reflected on and negotiated this constitution in different contexts.

Weedon (1996, p.108) describes subjectivity as "the site of consensual regulation of individuals". This regulation appears "natural" when an individual's subjectivity aligns with their interests. When this is out of alignment, however, Weedon (1996) proposes that individuals may start to resist a subject position. An important part of this thesis is a consideration of the resistance that participants demonstrated to their discursive construction as welfare cheats, inadequate mothers, and unwilling workers: a subjectivity that participants – not surprisingly – did not see aligning with their best interests. Understanding the capacity of participants to resist their constitution in welfare discourse is important aspect of this thesis. As Weedon

(1996, p.109) proposes, acceptance of or challenges to the discursive constitution of subjectivity needs to be understood within a broader framework of relationships of power.

### **Discourse, power, and resistance**

Foucauldian approaches to discourse are concerned with power relations. Foucault wrote extensively about power. His works, *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1978) are highly significant in their linking of power and social control through an emphasis on the interdependent relationship between knowledge and power. In these works Foucault challenged the notion that there is one universal “truth” with the contention that knowledge and power are interrelated.

Foucault (1980) maintained:

Truth isn't outside power... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth. Its 'general politics' of truth; that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p.131)

Knowledge and what comes to be accepted as truth evolve out of struggles for power.

In her analysis of Foucault's theorising of discourse, Weedon (1996) explains that the most powerful discourses in society are those with strong institutional bases: the law, social welfare, education, medicine and the organisation of work and family. Those with power in society are able to promote their own interests; these interests develop into accepted “truth” and legitimise the systems of power. Discourse then,

from a Foucauldian perspective, is inseparable from power. For Foucault (1980), the production and circulation of discourses are inherent aspects of social power.

It is clear from the literature cited in the previous chapter that women who rely on the state for support in New Zealand experience real power imbalances as they move through the process of collecting their welfare entitlements (e.g. Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Morton et al, 2014; Uttley 2000), and these imbalances frame this thesis. From a Foucauldian perspective, however, while power is considered as a major source of social discipline and conformity, it is not seen as exerting full control over people (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). Power does not belong to one person or one group of people but is conceptualised as an arrangement of relations between different factions changing with situations and time. Relations of power are not immutable, and circumstances can alter the flow of power from one point to another.

Foucault's (1980) conceptualisation of power relations offers a way of contextualising individual experience within an analysis of power. Foucault (1980) wrote:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised. (p.142)

Weedon (1996, p.106) illustrates her discussion of Foucauldian power relations with the example of welfare mothers who are constituted both as mothers and as economically autonomous individuals in welfare policy. She argues that this lack of discursive consistency offers the possibility of reverse discourse thereby enabling the "subjected subject of a discourse" to voice her understandings of a situation. This thesis pays attention to the way that dominant discourses were contested and negotiated by welfare recipients. A Foucauldian understanding of power and resistance offers a way of understanding power relations within the welfare environment.

### **From biopower to neoliberalism**

Foucault's contention that power acts on all of us, irrespective of our place in the social hierarchy is very important in this thesis. Everybody in society is to some extent constituted by what he termed "biopower" (Foucault, 1978, p.140). Foucault (1978) outlined the transformation that took place in many European societies during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as social control began to replace the physical violence that had been used to regulate people. The term biopower explains technologies that began to appear from this time to classify and subsequently control the human body and its conduct, replacing the need for violent punishments:

Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself. (Foucault 1978, 142–3)

Biopower refers to the ways in which populations are managed in order to maximise productivity.

One context in which Foucault (1980) identified the workings of biopower was in the development of welfare provision. He highlighted a significant shift in the way the unemployed were perceived in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe arguing that, "an analysis of idleness and its conditions and effects tends to replace the somewhat global charitable sacralisation of the poor" that had existed previously (Foucault, 1980, p.169). Unemployment became problematized and the provision of aid to the poor, by Foucault's account, was designed to increase their economic output through improving living conditions, sanitation, and education. Those who resisted attempts at "improvement" encountered policy legitimising their transfer into poor houses: institutions designed to punish a lack of economic productivity while at the same time serving as a warning to other members of society.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault (1978; 1986) explained how technologies have evolved in modern societies in order to continually evaluate and test bodies against prescribed norms. Problems are constructed that subsequently require interventions. Individuals are categorised as normal and healthy, or alternatively as deviant and unhealthy, and treatments prescribed as necessary. Foucault drew attention to techniques that serve to regulate individuals in modern societies, for example those encouraging “the care of the self” through the self-management of our bodies and our actions. The aim of biopower is to create self-monitoring populations as people begin to adapt their behaviour in order to function as healthy citizens. This is in the state’s interest as those who are healthy are generally more productive. Biopower, therefore, is the power that produces self-regulating citizens within modern, industrial societies in order to exploit their economic potential.

In his analysis of Foucault’s work, Martin Hewitt (1991) considers the way that biopower is manifested in modern societies through the state’s concern with the wellbeing but, ultimately, the productivity of bodies. The needs of the population are not an end in themselves, but are to be met in order to increase the power of the state. Social policy, Hewitt (1991, p.255) argues, targets certain groups with the ultimate aim of “shap[ing] the social to accord with the tasks and exigencies faced by the state” (Hewitt, 1991, p.225). Hewitt (1991) proposes that although the state is a powerful configuration, it is less important to analyses of power than a consideration of biopower. He highlights the way that social policy relies upon normalising discourses to manage the lives of individuals in modern societies. Normative judgements are able to influence behaviour far beyond that prescribed by the state as individuals begin to assess their own views and behaviours against social norms. This self-regulation of mind and body produces a self-awareness that defines the modern subject.

In a series of lectures *The Birth of Politics*, given in 1978-1979, Foucault began to identify the emergence of a new power formation exceeding that defined in his previous writing. In these lectures Foucault (2008) outlined the way that neoliberal thought had expanded the scope of the economic to evaluate all social action and

behaviour in terms of economic classifications. In a lecture dated March 21, 1979 he identified two consequences of this:

First the generalization of the economic form of the market beyond monetary exchanges functions in American neo-liberalism as a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behaviour. This means that analysis in terms of the market economy or, in other words, of supply and demand, can function as a schema which is applicable to non-economic domains (p.243) ...

The second interesting use of these neo-liberal analyses ... involves scrutinizing every action of the public authorities in terms of the game of supply and demand, in terms of efficiency with regard to the particular elements of this game, and in terms of the cost of intervention by the public authorities in the field. In short, it involves criticism of the governmentality actually exercised which is not just a political or juridical criticism; it is a market criticism opposed to the action of public authorities. (p.246)

The first corollary of this merging of the economic and the social, Foucault (2008) noted, was that decisions relating to areas of life such as family and welfare have come to be evaluated against market criteria. He offered the example of the relationship of mothers to their children to illustrate the way that these realms are no longer framed in opposition, but are conceived as complementing each other. The time mothers spend with their children has increasingly come to be seen as an investment in terms of creating a child's human capital. This relationship, he proposes, can be evaluated in terms of "investment, capital costs, and profit – both economic and psychological profit – on the capital invested" measured ultimately in terms of the child's future income (Foucault, 2008, p.244).

Foucault's example of mothers has much relevance for my own research, not only in drawing attention to the rendering of the social sphere as economic, but also in relation to the conflict for mothers who receive welfare. An emphasis on economic



output places pressure on all individuals in society to be financially independent. While mothers who receive welfare may feel compelled to invest time increasing their children's human capital, their ability to do this is hampered by state pressure to become economically independent. Although Foucault (2008) did not engage directly with this conflict, his work encourages an examination of neoliberalism's constitutive effects. Considering the discursive practices that constitute women in social policy in this country highlights shifting and contingent power relations. The overlap between the social and economic spheres now means women are constituted as both economically productive citizens, and as the mothers of future economically productive citizens.

The second consequence of neoliberalism noted by Foucault (2008) was that interventions by the state have come to be assessed in terms of their economic viability. Oksala (2013) has used a Foucauldian approach to highlight the symbiotic relationship between political power and economic growth. It is now no longer possible to argue against economic progress as the goal of good state leadership: this goal has become value neutral. An economic rationality has come to dominate all aspects of life constituting every political and social decision as economic. This has ultimately led to the dismantling of the welfare state being justified in "cost benefit terms" (Foucault, 2008, p.247), and to future spending being rejected on the basis of non-affordability. The neoliberal economic argument, Oksala (2013, p.37) argues, "has simply won in this governmental game of truth". This is the neoliberal discursive formation, referred to above, that frames this thesis.

### **Governmentality and the neoliberal subject**

A number of writers have described the shift from Keynesian influenced welfare policy to welfare based on the expansion of market relationships using Foucault's concept of governmentality (Larner, 2000; Lemke, 2001; Oksala, 2013). Foucault (1991) coined the term "governmentality" to refer to the way the state exercises control over the population by both governing (in its more literal sense) and through modes of thought. Thomas Lemke (2001) argues that the value of governmentality

as a theoretical concept is its emphasis on neoliberalism, not simply as ideology, but as constituting a social reality that it implies already exists. Governmentality offers a means of theorising the way conscientious and moral individuals are encouraged to act according to a neoliberal rationality (Lemke, 2001). Neoliberal citizens make decisions based on rational assessments of the costs and benefits of their actions.

In relation to welfare, neoliberalism encourages individuals to respond to reduced state intervention with a form of entrepreneurship as they responsibly care for themselves and their dependents (Lemke, 2001). Lemke (2001) argues that the notion of governmentality is particularly useful for recognising how power both objectivises and subjectivises, drawing attention to the constituted-constituting subject. Governmentality then refers not only to the governing of others but to the governing of one's self. It can be used to account for mechanisms of social control as individuals monitor their own behaviours in accordance with dominant modes of thought. Through tracing the history of governmentality, Lemke (2001 p.191) proposes, Foucault has established "how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence".

Wendy Larner (2000) and Johanna Oksala (2013) similarly refer to governmentality to illustrate that neoliberalism is constitutive of political activity and the objects of that activity. Larner (2000, p.6) defines neoliberalism as both "a political discourse about the nature of rule, and a set of practices that facilitates the governing of individuals from a distance". She proposes that, for all its talk of less government intervention, neoliberalism does not mean less governance. In defining neoliberalism in this way she draws attention to the discourses associated with neoliberalism that act as a system of meaning constituting people and practices in particular ways. Neoliberalism encourages the conception of self as an individual active subject encouraged to "work on ourselves" in order to enhance our health, happiness and financial security (Larner, 2000, p.13). The emphasis on individualism is not merely pervasive rhetoric, but draws attention to the way that subjects are constituted in discourse. The modern neoliberal citizen is one who works independently to attain social and economic wellbeing.

Negotiating neoliberal citizenship can have specific implications for women. Oksala (2013) proposes that a Foucauldian approach can highlight the way that women have come to be seen and to see themselves as neoliberal subjects. As I have noted above, women are often constituted in conflicting ways: as mothers, as competitors for economic opportunities, as independent subjects. New Zealand lone mothers have an obligation to increase the human capital of their children *and* to perform as economically independent actors. For welfare mothers these shifting discursive practices have become sites of conflict and resistance as neoliberal influenced social policy has increased pressure on them to become economically independent of the state.

### **Neoliberalism, governmentality and emotion**

In *Technologies of the Self*, Rux Martin (1988) claimed Foucault's writings:

carry profound emotional undercurrents unusual in scholarly analyses:  
anguish in *Discipline and Punish*, scorn and hope in *The Order of Things*,  
outrage and sadness in *Madness and Civilization* (p.9).

There has, however, been a general lack of attention paid to emotion in Foucault's work. Anne Marie D'Aoust (2014b, p.267) proposes that Foucault's concern was often overtly on pragmatic rationalities. This could certainly be claimed in relation to discussions of neoliberalism and governmentality – “the conduct of conduct” – that draw attention to the relationship between power and subjectivity. The emphasis is on rationality in arguments detailing discursive practices that prescribe the conduct of ideal subjects and the way in which they self-govern in relation to this prescription.

While the rational and reasoned citizen is explicitly implicated in the governing of oneself, there is also an “emotional struggle” involved in practicing moral discourses (Halperin, 2007; Lambevski, 2009). There is much emotion associated with the

process of becoming a neoliberal citizen. David Halperin (2007, p.28) has challenged what he refers to as the “familiar binary model” that “positions the hypercognitive, well-disciplined, rational, and calculating neoliberal subject over against his shadowy opposite, the pathological defective, victimized, reason-impaired subject”. Paying attention to gay male subjectivity, Halperin (2007) examines the emotion involved as gay men negotiate moral discourses in the context of the HIV/ AIDs crisis. Halperin (2007) writes:

Our very loves and pleasures are constituted in relation to parts of ourselves that are causes of irredeemable shame in our social experience of them. In the era of gay pride, moreover, such shame is the occasion for further shame.  
(p.69)

This thesis similarly draws attention to the emotional struggle involved in claiming neoliberal citizenship, specifically for women as they negotiate the often conflicting roles of mothers, citizens and welfare recipients. An examination of the emotional aspect in this negotiation highlights how women who receive welfare are affected by specific relations of power. Paying attention to a Foucauldian theory of subjectivity informed my consideration of the interplay between emotions and neoliberal rationality.

A small number of writers have also engaged with this interplay. A special issue of the journal *Global Society* titled “Emotions, Governmentality and Neoliberalism” drew together a collection of articles focusing on the role of emotion in power relations; the association of neoliberal practices with specific emotional dispositions; and a consideration of the response that emotions can offer to relations of power. In her discussion of immigrant marriage, D’Aoust (2014a) highlights the signification of emotion in migrant marriage. Love qualifies migrants to reunite across international borders, but at the same time, couples must prove the authenticity of their emotions. Love then becomes a form of capital enabling movement from country to country. In the same journal issue, Wanda Vrasti and Jean Michel Montsion (2014) reference Foucault’s work on governmentality to propose that organisations

demonstrating free market principles, such as competition and private enterprise, are still required to demonstrate forms of social responsibility. Focusing on case studies of transnational volunteerism they argue that:

volunteerism is well poised to capture the great Foucauldian lesson on neoliberal government, where the task of government is no longer to correct market imbalances... but to intervene in society to make sure it contains the necessary values, tastes and attitudes for flexible accumulation to run smoothly. (p.338)

Within the context of critical human geography, Ben Anderson (2012; 2014) has similarly advocated paying attention to the affective undercurrents that operate in neoliberal societies. He contends that engaging with Foucault's work on biopolitics and neoliberalism facilitates a consideration of the way modes of biopower cohere with feelings and emotion. Anderson (2014) proposes that affective conditions become reconstituted within policies and programmes that manage modern life through disciplinary mechanisms. In relation to welfare mothers, welfare discourses suggest ways they should feel about themselves and others, encouraging affective reactions. Disgust at welfare dependency is used to simultaneously justify punitive welfare measures and to encourage those on welfare into the work force. As Yvonne Hartman (2005, p.69) has argued "what person would wish to think of themselves as a 'bludger'? And who would not wish to assert their independence from the infantilizing nipple of welfare dependency". Negotiating neoliberal citizenship when one is a welfare recipient can in no way be cast as a process free of emotion.

In her discussion of the "emotionalised art of government" or "emotionalities of rule", Elaine Campbell (2010) challenges assumptions that power, morality and ethics can ever be emotion free. Instead, she proposes, there are emotional and affective intensities continually informing discursive ways of being. To assume autonomous subjects make purely rational decisions to identify with technologies and practices of self, she proposes, is a denial of the emotional forces that inform such decisions. Campbell (2010, p.52) argues that such forces "confront and unsettle

our ontological security, ... troubling our sense of social order and stability but also provok[ing] a questioning of the work of government and its capacity to direct our own and others' conduct". It is passion, she contends, that encourages an identification with or resistance to governmental programmes and policies. Such decisions can never simply be a matter of cognition or reason.

In this thesis I draw from Campbell (2010) in drawing attention to the affective agency of participants in the research. Affective agency describes the normalisation of ways of feeling as an integral part of modern citizenship. Campbell (2010) argues that approaching research in this way has much to offer. It enables an engagement with the way that modes of responsibility in neoliberalism involve obligations not only to moral codes, but also to appropriate emotions. She offers tolerance, compassion and optimism as examples of appropriate feelings for neoliberal citizens. In the context of this research, I propose that intolerance and a lack of compassion (even disgust) towards those who do not conform to this model of citizenship are also deemed appropriate. Campbell (2010) suggests that neoliberal citizenship relies on an affective identity as much as it does a rational subjectivity. Citizenship credentials are established not only by being independent and self-sufficient, but also by displaying the appropriate feelings. Managing an affective subjectivity then becomes an integral part of maintaining neoliberal citizenship.

### **Affect: Excess or social activity?**

As noted in the previous chapter, this thesis has been informed by writing emerging across the social sciences concerned with theorising affect and emotion (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Clough, 2008; Massumi, 2002; Probyn, 2004; 2005, Wetherell, 2012). Much of this "affect theory" is intended to broaden the possibilities of social research as it focuses on what moves people and how emotion moves between them. A key consideration is the transformative experience of feelings and emotions.

Affect is defined in the literature in a number of ways. At times the term is used to describe every characteristic related to emotion. On other occasions it is used to refer only to involuntary sensations such as blushes or flashes of anger: the state of being affected. Anderson (2014) has drawn together a number of explanations summarising affect as:

A heterogeneous range of phenomena that are taken to be part of life: background moods such as depression, moments of intense and focused involvement such as euphoria, immediate visceral responses of shame or hate, shared atmospheres of hope or panic, eruptions of passion, lifelong dedications of love, fleeting feelings of boredom, societal moods such as anxiety or fear, neurological bodily transitions such as a feeling of aliveness, waves of feeling ... amongst much else. (p.5)

Anderson's (2014) comment "amongst much else" draws attention to the diverse, contradictory and often contentious states the term has been used to describe. Affect theorists are often at odds over the way they conceptualise emotion and affect. For some a differentiation between the two terms is theoretically critical. A number of writers indebted to the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins have sought to identify that which is outside culturally constructed interpretations of feelings (e.g. Clough, 2008; Massumi, 2002; Probyn, 2005; Sedgwick, 2003). This analytic interest has involved attempts to distinguish between the conscious and unconscious processing of feelings, and appears to have grown from a concern that focusing attention on emotion as a form of social expression fails to encapsulate aspects of feeling that cannot be consciously articulated. For Brian Massumi (2002, p.28) emotion is "the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience" while affect is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic in nature". He argues that affect describes involuntary, non-cognitive bodily reactions and that it is something that is beyond discourse (Massumi, 2002). Patricia Clough (2008, p.4) similarly proposes that affect is autonomous "an escape from the particular thing that embodies it". In her work *The Affective Turn*, a title that has been widely adopted as a description of the increased interest in affect theory, she describes affect as a force or an energy

that is ambiguous or excessive: a sensory experience that cannot be socially recognised as emotion.

The privileging of corporeal response within the affective turn has not gone unchallenged. In her sharp critique of this turn, Ruth Leys (2011) questions the separation, particularly in the work of Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003), between affect and reason. Leys' (2011, p.471) criticism focuses specifically on what she refers to as a "false opposition between the mind and the body" in their work. She disputes this dichotomy arguing that it relies on untenable assumptions about the absence of intention, and challenging the claim that affect is independent of signification and meaning. For Leys (2011) the claim that cognition of an affect comes "too late" for intention to have a role in action or behaviour is unsupported in the psychobiology cited by these theorists.

Clare Hemmings (2005) similarly focuses her critique on the work of Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003). Their attempts to separate corporeal responses from meaning making, Hemmings (2005) contends, align with a broader opposition to a poststructuralist approach to language. She argues, however, that Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003) "overstate the problems of poststructuralism ... construct[ing] a critical history at the same time as they dismiss it" (Hemmings, 2005, p.556). While recognising the desire to push the limits of analysis beyond what can be naturally articulated, Hemmings (2005) argues that poststructuralist theorists still have much to offer studies of affect and specifically challenges the assertion that affect can be extra-discursive. Affect is not always outside of discourse, she contends, but can often be seen as "a central mechanism of social reproduction" (Hemmings, 2005, p.551). Furthermore, Hemmings (2005) argues that attempts to separate affect from discourse can hinder affect research. The turn to affect in the work of Massumi (2002) and Sedgwick (2003), she contends, is a promotion of an "attitude" rather than a "method" (Hemmings, 2005, p.563) lacking any articulation for how affect may be utilised as a critical tool.



Like Hemmings (2005), Wetherell (2012; 2013) also disputes the way many involved in the turn to affect have distanced themselves from discourse studies. Social actors, Wetherell (2013) proposes, are routinely working to make sense of their experiences – sensory or otherwise. When we experience an emotion or are affected by something, we engage in a process of meaning making. Affect, from this perspective, is formed in and through social activity: it is part of social interaction. In an argument that has offered much to this thesis, Wetherell (2012, p.21) has criticised what she perceives as an attempt to draw a “thick dividing line between bodies and talk and text”. In empirical research, Wetherell (2012) argues, affect cannot be easily detached from discourse and, she proposes, attempts to do so can be counterproductive. Considering affect and discourse together, is not a denial of the unpredictability of affect, but rather involves paying attention to the normative sequences of emotion. Furthermore, like Hemmings, (2005), Wetherell (2013, p.356) highlights the methodological challenges of engaging in affect research without discourse, asking how can researchers describe what they find “if the interest is in events below the threshold of representation?”

There are several other writers who have similarly grounded their discussions of affect in analyses of social life, and whose work has also contributed to the theoretical framing of this thesis. Anderson (2014, p 17), whose definition of affect I cited above, also advocates “an account of how affective life is organised and mediated that sits alongside the emphasis on the excess of affective life over and above existing determinations”. He contends that attending to affect offers the possibility of recognising those moments when the social is reconfigured in unexpected ways. Sara Ahmed (2014) proposes that emotions move us and what moves us also connects us – to bodies, to places, to things. When we are affected by something (or somebody or some place) we become connected to it. Ahmed (2014, p.209) argues that, “emotions involve different movements towards and away from others, such that they shape the contours of social as well as bodily space”. In other words the impact of emotions is not merely felt in individual bodies, but also influences the relationship that these bodies have with their communities. Considering affect and discourse together offers a way of accounting for waves of

feeling in a social context. My interest is in the way that affect conforms to patterns that fit into familiar social frameworks, but also how it can offer unexpected responses to these structures.

## **Conclusion**

A poststructuralist conceptualisation of discourse, subjectivity, power and resistance frames my discussion of the ways in which lone mothers on welfare negotiated the various subject positions available to them. It offers a position from which to consider the women in my research as active subjects with the capacity to respond to the power relations shaping the delivery of welfare in New Zealand. Foucault's historical explanation concerning the development of the hegemonic power of the state in modern societies also informs this thesis. His work in relation to biopower and governmentality offers an explanation for the way that beneficiaries are constituted through social discourses. Poststructuralist approaches to research focus on relations of power in society as expressed through language and practices. Foucault's concept of governmentality offers a way of accounting for neoliberal welfare both as a response to a deregulated political environment, and as a justification for reduced state intervention. It emphasises the tension that exists for welfare mothers as neoliberal subjects, through the merging of the economic and social realms, a tension which gives context to this thesis.

This chapter emphasises the rationality underpinning neoliberal citizenship as social life has become subjected to a form of cost benefit analysis historically associated with economic activities. At the same time, it draws attention to the role emotion has to play in creating self-regulating neoliberal citizens. By focusing on emotion I am interested in identifying how the women who took part in my research were moved by their experiences of welfare receipt. In relating emotion to movement and transformation I look to the emerging body of writing on emotion and affect. Like a number of the writers cited in this chapter I consider affect as a form of energy or extreme sensation. Yet while I consider emotion as a reaction that is at times unpredictable, I situate this thesis firmly within a discussion of the social and political

emphasising the relationship between emotion, bodies, and social context. My thesis considers the way the women who took part in the research were affected by the discourses that constitute welfare beneficiaries in New Zealand, and by their interactions in the welfare environment. In subsequent chapters I locate participants' affective responses not only within this context, but also within the social setting of the focus groups. This thesis considers embodied responses to the social and political activities of welfare provision.

## Research design and analysis

In this chapter I discuss the strategies I employed throughout the research design and analysis process. My aim throughout all stages of the research was to maintain critical reflection on my research practice. Underpinning the research were the interconnected concepts of *teleological* (or consequential) *ethics* and *reflexivity*. Teleological ethics involves researchers showing responsiveness to the research setting, and a consideration of the likely consequences of the research. From this perspective research actions are not inherently right or wrong, but rather may be considered so because of the outcome of those actions (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; 2014). Ethical research involves reflexively considering research practice to ensure it takes into consideration the interests of the research participants.

Many of the decisions outlined during this chapter were prompted by this concern. This included: the decision to use focus groups; the inclusion of Māori and Pasifika advisors in the design and implementation of the groups; the recruitment process; my decision to offer recompense to the participants; and the initiation of a blog to disseminate some of the research findings. Reflexive practice is not only that which considers the impact of the research on participants, but also involves the researcher engaging with their relationship to the research process. Throughout the project, I kept a journal documenting many aspects of the research process and my reactions to these. Excerpts of a number of key research moments from my journal are included in this chapter. Evaluating and engaging with these moments as I wrote this thesis enabled me to understand both my influence on the research, and the

accountability I had to the participants. This chapter outlines the research decisions I made in order to realise these aspects.

### **Using focus groups in research with vulnerable populations**

The women who took part in this research meet Pranee Liangputtong's (2006) definition of a vulnerable population: those who have diminished autonomy or are marginalised in some way. Indeed Liangputtong (2006) specifically refers to single mothers as belonging to this group. As such, an acknowledgement of the role of power in this research project was an integral part of the planning and execution. Power relations have increasingly come to preoccupy qualitative researchers who work with vulnerable populations. Much work has taken place within this context as researchers have been challenged to question their practices in relation to power, considering how researcher privilege is reinscribed in the process of conducting research (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007).

My decision to utilise focus groups to collect the data was made from the perspective of addressing power dynamics in the research. I am not now, nor have I ever, received Sole Parent Support. On the contrary I am raising my daughter with my husband, and without any of the concerns associated with life on welfare. I also identify as Pākehā, and I planned to interview Māori and Pasifika women. Feminist researchers have drawn attention to the usefulness of focus groups in shifting the balance of power and control in favour of research participants, empowering them to direct the conversation towards their own agendas (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Wilkinson, 1998; 2008). Hannah Frith (2000) notes the reduction in researcher control inherent during the focus group process in comparison to a one-on-one interview. The goal of the focus group is to give participants the opportunity to voice their opinions, and the interaction between them inevitably reduces the influence of the group moderator (Liangputtong, 2011).

Sue Wilkinson (1998) argues that such dynamics help counter the power imbalance between researcher and researched, ultimately improving the quality of the data

collected. The dynamics of group conversations can empower participants to share their views and experiences, encouraging discussion on sensitive topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Liamputtong, 2011). A number of writers have emphasised that interacting with those who have had similar experiences may be less intimidating for participants than a one-on-one interview with a researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Madriz, 2000). This makes focus group interviews a particularly effective method to use when working with sensitive topics as group discussion may ease disclosure on subjects that can be potentially difficult to speak about.

Social interaction is an inherent part of the focus group method. Focus group participants may be more open and spontaneous when compared to those interviewed individually (Liamputtong, 2011). Participants may reinforce or challenge each other's opinions, presenting the researcher with a snapshot of everyday social interaction (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The emphasis on the point of view of the participants can offer the researcher access to everyday ways of talking about a subject. Although this thesis emerged from my interpretation of the transcripts, the collective nature of the group discussions helped ensure a multiplicity of views was gathered for analysis.

The potential for focus group conversations to be directed by the research participants can offer researchers the opportunity to "listen to local voices", and to analyse broad socio-cultural meanings around a topic (Liamputtong, 2011, p.106). This makes the focus group method particularly appropriate for cross-cultural research (Colucci, 2008; Liamputtong 2011; Madriz, 2000). Liamputtong (2011) argues that this data collection method enables researchers to observe cultural norms and values that differ from their own. She emphasises that the collective nature inherent in focus groups allows minority groups to articulate their views and opinions. This method, Liamputtong (2011), notes can be particularly appropriate for women from non-western cultures as traditionally such women have used group conversation as a means of resisting everyday oppression.

### **Engaging participants from diverse backgrounds**

The body of existing research with lone mothers, cited in the previous chapter, emphasises that these women are not a homogenous group. From the earliest planning stages, therefore, my intention was to include a diversity of perspectives in my research. The selection criterion for the research was broad: women who receive (or have recently received) Sole Parent Support. I wanted to interview women from a range of age groups, backgrounds, geographical locations, and ethnicities. In 2013 when I began planning this research, 46% of those receiving Sole Parent Support identified their ethnicity as Māori, 35% identified as Pākehā and 10% identified as Pasifika people (Ministry of Social Development, 2013).<sup>16</sup> For this reason I wanted to include women from all three ethnicities in the research. In making this decision I was influenced by a 2011 research project that examined resilience across Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā sole parent families (Waldegrave et al., 2011). Of particular relevance was the finding in each section of the study of negative interactions with Work and Income administrators. The project acknowledged the shared challenges as well as the notable differences in relation to these interactions across the three populations. I made the decision, therefore, to interview women from these different population groups in order further explore these similarities and differences.

As a Pākehā researcher considerable thought needed to go into the design of a research project to include non-Pākehā participants. Paul Spoonley (1999, p.51) has identified cross-cultural research, research in which the ethnicity of those conducting the research differs from those participating in it, as “fraught” and “with important consequences for the communities involved”. In her critique of the Western research paradigm, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that the term research itself is “inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism”. Smith (2012) advocates for “indigenous perspectives on research” (p.3), arguing that many Māori communities are not only suspicious of “non-indigenous researchers,

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<sup>16</sup> As of December 2016 the percentage of Māori receiving sole parent support had increased to 48%. The percentage of Pacific people receiving this benefit had increased to 11% and the number of Pākehā had decreased to 30% (Ministry of Social Development, 2017).

but of the whole philosophy of research and the different sets of beliefs which underlie the research process” (p.173). Huia Jahnke and Julia Taiapa (2003, p.50) similarly propose that “Māori themselves should be involved in the design, delivery, management, and monitoring of the research process”. They contend that what is crucial is considering a methodology that is relevant to Māori.

Both of these perspectives informed the research design in relation to Māori and Pasifika women. In designing the research I employed what Smith (2012, p.179) has referred to as a strategy of consultation with Māori and Pasifika people in which I sought support and consent for my research. This was also suggested by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, which approved the research design with the provision that I initiate a formal process of consultation with Māori (Appendix 1). I subsequently made an application to the Māori Research Advisory Group (MRAG), so that they could review my research proposal. The MRAG suggested that I form a steering group to guide me through the research design process. I approached Yvonne Crichton-Hill, Chair of the board of Pacific Trust Canterbury (Samoan and Anglo descent), Moana-o-Hinerangi (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe, Waitaha, Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Kōnohi, Ngāti Hikairo, Rakaipaaka), an experienced Māori researcher, and Jim Anglem (Ngāi Tahu),<sup>17</sup> Kaumatua for Te Awatea Research Centre and they agreed to form this group.

The steering group was enthusiastic about the use of focus groups for Māori women with Moana-o-Hinerangi as group facilitator. The group was, however, less certain about the applicability of the method for Pasifika women. In order to discuss this further, Yvonne Crichton-Hill introduced me to a Manager at Pacific Trust Canterbury, a provider of health and social services for the Pasifika community. I presented my research proposal to him and he then spoke with social workers employed at the Trust. A few weeks later he contacted me and advised that the Trust felt using the focus group method would be an inappropriate way to work with Pasifika people. The social work team had expressed the opinion that it could be

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<sup>17</sup> Ethnicity was self-reported. Moana-o-Hinerangi and Jim Anglem provided iwi (tribal) affiliations.



difficult for their clients to talk about their experiences of welfare openly with others. Having worked closely with women as they moved through the process of collecting their benefits, the social workers were aware that many of these experiences were negative. They felt that speaking about these experiences in front of others would be potentially shaming for the individual and their families. Given the closeness of the Pasifika community in Christchurch they were also concerned about confidentiality in a group setting. While using individual interviews with Pasifika women potentially added some limitations to my data analysis (discussed later in this chapter) researcher flexibility in adapting methods is often necessary for specific research populations (Colucci, 2008). An inherent part of my research was the involvement of members of the research community in the research design. On the Trust's advice, therefore, I offered Pasifika women the option of one-on-one interviews.

### **Participant recruitment**

As noted above, the women who took part in this research meet Liamputtong's (2006) definition of a vulnerable population. Liamputtong (2006) notes that such populations may be reluctant to take part in research, and may not readily trust researchers. Two techniques that she notes have proven successful with such populations are snowball strategies and the use of gatekeeping agencies. I utilised both of these strategies in my recruitment of participants. In Christchurch I sent letters to a number of organisations whose client groups include women who receive Sole Parent Support: Presbyterian Support Services, Single Women as Parents, St John of God Waipuna (Appendix 2). After I presented my research proposal to them, these organisations agreed to assist in recruitment. The organisations distributed fliers (see Appendix 3) to clients who met the research criteria, inviting the women to make contact with me. Women who contacted me were asked if they knew anyone else who would be interested in taking part. They were also sent an information sheet (Appendix 4) with more detailed information about the research.

In recruiting participants for the Pasifika groups I met with social workers at Pacific Trust Canterbury to present my research directly to them. The social workers identified three clients who met the research criteria, invited them to take part in the research, and provided them with an information sheet specific to Pasifika participants (Appendix 5). Two of the three women asked to be interviewed together. Two other Pasifika women heard about the research through professional connections to Pacific Trust (although they were not clients) and volunteered to take part together. In the end I held three interviews: two groups of two and one woman who was interviewed on her own. A total of seven women in the research identified with one or more Pasifika ethnic groups. Two women opted to take part in non-ethnicity specific focus groups

To engage participants outside of Christchurch, I made contact with two organisations with a strong social media presence: Wellington Young Feminists and the Auckland Women's Centre. My flier was shared on a number of other social media sites. Many women from around New Zealand subsequently contacted me, and I was able to organise one group in Wellington and two in Auckland. A number of women from Christchurch also contacted me after seeing this information. Of all the recruitment strategies utilised, social media via gatekeeping agencies appeared to be the most effective. Many of the women who took part in the research, irrespective of background, educational level or ethnicity talked about using social networking sites.

Moana-o-Hinerangi assisted in recruitment for the groups with Māori women. Moana has an extensive network of contacts through her background in Māori development within the health, social services and education sectors. There were a number of advantages to Moana being "embedded in the social networks" from which we were recruiting participants (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p.88). Moana's stated aim as a researcher is to focus on projects that benefit Māori. Her reputation therefore gave credibility to my research and helped establish my credentials as a researcher competent in conducting cross-cultural research. Using her personal contacts gave me access to participants who may not have taken part in the research otherwise.

In recruiting Māori women we decided to use a snowball technique whereby we identified several women from Moana's personal networks who met the research criteria, and they then put us in contact with other potential participants. We ran three focus groups comprising 11 women in total: one of five women, one of four and one where two women took part. Moana facilitated each of these groups while I observed. I also sent out recruitment fliers as part of the general recruitment process advising that ethnicity specific groups would be held, and offering this option to anyone identifying as Māori or Pasifika. One Māori woman contacted me to take part in one of these groups. A total of 17 women in the research identified as Māori. Five women opted to join either the general groups or the groups for Pasifika women.

In order to include voices of beneficiaries outside of the major New Zealand cities, I decided to hold a focus group in a rural location. Again I made contact with a gatekeeping agency: a community organisation providing social services in a small rural community. After presenting my research proposal to them, they agreed to assist in the recruitment process and they sent my flier to potential participants. Women interested in taking part contacted me directly. The focus group was held in the offices of the community organisation. I have made the decision not to identify the organisation or the town in order to protect the identities of those taking part in the research.

As noted my intention in recruiting participants was to include a diversity of perspectives in my research. I wanted to recruit women from different socio-cultural contexts as well as different ethnicities in order to access multiple perspectives on the experience of receiving welfare. For this reason I decided to target university students in the recruitment process. New Zealand research indicates that young people from families with higher socioeconomic status are five times more likely to go to university than young people from unskilled/semi-skilled socioeconomic status family backgrounds (Fergusson & Woodward, 2000). While a number of women

recruited through other means were studying, I decided to specifically approach university students in an attempt to incorporate some diversity in socioeconomic background into the research. To do this I put up a flier (Appendix 3) at two childcare centres located at the University of Canterbury, and emailed Social Work and Human Services students enrolled at the University of Canterbury asking if they or anyone they knew was interested in participating in the research. Two focus groups were subsequently held at the University.

In total I carried out fifteen focus group interviews and one one-on-one interview. I interviewed 64 women aged from 19 to 57: the average age at the time of the interviews was 33 years. The average length of time the women reported receiving a benefit was five years. 41 of the participants identified their ethnicity as Pākehā, 17 as Māori, nine identified with one or more Pasifika ethnicities, one woman identified herself as Indian, one as Peruvian and one as Euro-Asian (see Appendix 6 for demographic data).<sup>18</sup> While groups for Māori and Pasifika women were constituted on the basis of ethnicity, and students attended groups at the University of Canterbury, in general the groups were formed around convenience of time and location for the participants. I put together a focus group schedule with a number of different dates and geographical locations, and participants chose the most convenient time and location for them.

Interviews took place in a variety of places: in meeting rooms at Canterbury University, in the offices of community advocate groups, in community centres, and a private room in a café. Two interviews with Pasifika women were held in the participants' own homes, and one in the offices of Pacific Trust Canterbury. The groups with Māori women were held in Moana-o-Hinerangi's home. In choosing locations, I looked for places that provided both participant comfort and researcher safety. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2013) note that researcher safety should be a key consideration of the research design. In the two interviews that took places in the participants' homes, I was accompanied by a social worker from the Pacific

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<sup>18</sup> Ethnicity was self-identified and some participants identified with more than one ethnicity.

Trust. The social worker advised other staff at the Trust of the time and location of the interviews. The women were also existing clients of the organisation and the social worker had visited their homes on a number of previous occasions. In a discussion of safety prior to inviting people into her home, Moana and I established that we would advise another person of the interview start time, and contact them after the interview was completed. All other groups took place in public spaces.

Irrespective of where the interviews were held, they were all run in a similar way. I provided snacks, tea and coffee. At the beginning of each group I introduced the research, answered any questions, and the women then signed a consent form (Appendix 6). On the consent form they could also indicate (by ticking a box) if they wanted to receive a summary of the results and/or a copy of the focus group transcript.<sup>19</sup> I distributed a questionnaire at the end of each group in order to collect demographic data (Appendix 7).

The majority of the groups took place in Christchurch, although many of the women interviewed had claimed benefits in locations around New Zealand. 12 groups were held in Christchurch, two in Auckland, one in Wellington, and one in a small rural town. While the sample could be seen as geographically skewed, my intention was not for representativeness, but rather for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences around claiming their entitlements. Figure One below shows the composition of the focus groups by ethnicity and location:<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> My intention to return transcripts to participants on request was stated in my ethics application form approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (HEC). Currently the University of Canterbury HEC recommends not returning focus group transcripts for member checking because of the possibility of breaches of confidentiality. There is the concern that individual participants would be identifiable in the transcripts and that this could jeopardize their privacy. Prior to sending out transcripts I removed any information that could potentially identify participants. The importance of confidentiality was discussed at the beginning of each focus group and, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), explicitly stated on the consent form signed by each participant (see Appendix 6).

<sup>20</sup> Three of the focus groups comprised only two participants. I discuss the implications of running groups of this size, referred to by Toner (2009) as very small focus groups (VSFGs), later in the chapter.

**Figure One: Focus Group Composition by Ethnicity and Location**

<b>Christchurch Groups/ Mixed Ethnicity</b>		<b>Rural Group/ Mixed Ethnicity</b>	
Christchurch Group (1)	4 participants	Rural Group	7 participants
Christchurch Group (2)	3 participants		
Christchurch Group (3)	3 participants		
Christchurch Group (4)	5 participants		
Christchurch Group (5)	5 participants		
Christchurch Group (6)	6 participants		
<b>Christchurch Groups/ Māori</b>		<b>Auckland Groups/ Mixed Ethnicity</b>	
Māori Group (1)	5 participants	Auckland Group (1)	3 participants
Māori Group (2)	4 participants	Auckland Group (2)	7 participants
Māori Group (3)	2 participants		
<b>Christchurch Groups/ Pasifika</b>		<b>Wellington Group/ Mixed Ethnicity</b>	
Pasifika Group (1)	2 participants	Wellington Group	6 participants
Pasifika Group (2)	1 participant		
Pasifika Group (3)	2 participants		

Liamputtong (2006) notes the “practical sensitivities” those undertaking research should develop when attempting to engage vulnerable people. She contends that “researchers should be aware of the time that is required for vulnerable people to participate in the study” (Liamputtong, 2006, p.68). Researchers working with marginalised populations have noted that many have “complex often chaotic biographies” (Dean, 2003, p.444), and this can often be associated with difficulties in engaging and retaining participants (Liamputtong, 2006). A number of women who initially expressed an interest in my research changed their minds as the date of the focus group drew nearer. I was careful not to put too much pressure on women to take part and instead began to allow for this in my planning of the groups. I over recruited for the groups on the basis that a number of participants would not attend. I also emailed or texted the women a week before each group, and texted a further reminder the day before. Despite this a number of women simply did not turn up. In general enough women attended for groups to go ahead. Two of the groups that we

attempted to hold with Māori women, however, had to be cancelled; the first as only one participant turned up, the second because no one arrived.

### **Research incentive**

Recognising that it might be difficult logistically for many of the women to attend a group, I spent time during the planning stages thinking about how I could facilitate this. In light of the fact that many potential participants were likely to be struggling financially and that childcare and transportation could be expected to present barriers for women attending the focus groups, I decided to offer a supermarket voucher to participants as recompense for their time and contribution. This was a decision that I gave a lot of thought to. While Liamputtong (2006, p.64) notes that “in recent times, more and more sensitive researchers provide compensation to their research participants”, there are a number of questions raised in relation to offering research incentives. This is particularly the case when the research cohort includes those from lower socioeconomic groups such as welfare recipients.

In a social justice context a number of writers have drawn attention to the ethical considerations relating to paying the poor to take part in research (Goodman et al., 2004; Paradis, 2000). On the one hand it is argued that participants should be compensated for their contribution to the research, yet on the other there is a concern that money “may have different meaning in different contexts” and compel those in poverty to participate in research that they would otherwise choose not to (Goodman et al., 2004, p.821). Emily Paradis (2000) frames the decision regarding payment to the poor as an ethical dilemma and, despite proposing that research participants are equal partners in the research process, expresses concern that offering a sum of money may act as an inducement to take part in the research. Indeed an early response from the Canterbury University Human Ethics Committee on this subject instructed me to amend my proposed information sheet stating “remove the sentence ‘what’s in it for you?’ as that suggests the voucher is an inducement rather than recompense”.

The relationship between motivation, inducement and coercion has been widely debated in the literature (Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Grady, 2001; Todd, 2001). There is a concern, for example, that the current system of paying large sums of money for biomedical experiments largely attracts participants who only take part for their own gain and, as a result, there is an overrepresentation of the poor in biomedical experiments (Viens, 2001). This concern is echoed in research with Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) indicating that many members believe payment constitutes undue influence because it is considered to be a motivating factor for research participants (Klitzman, 2013; Largent, Grady, Miller, & Wertheimer, 2012). While research has identified that financial motivation is not the only factor influencing the decision to participate in research (Fry & Dwyer, 2001; Russell, Moralejo, & Burgess, 2000; Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2013), it appears that paying participants does help researchers both recruit and retain participants (Singer, Van-Hoewyk & Maher, 1998), and that financial incentives are a key factor in encouraging people to participate in research (Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Bigorra & Banos, 1990; Cunny & Miller, 1994; Hermann, Heger-Mahn & Mahler, 1997). Surveys of research participants from lower socioeconomic groups have also indicated that payment is often an important factor in their decision to participate (Fry & Dwyer, 2001; Slomka, McCurdy, Ratliff, Timpson & Williams 2007; Smith et al., 2007).

While money may motivate people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds into taking part in research, there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that paying people leads to them making poor or risky decisions (Ballantyne, 2008; Bentley & Thacker, 2004; Emanuel, 2004; 2005; Wilkinson & Moore, 1997). Research with low-income participants in South Africa, for example, has emphasised their capacity to recognise and avoid questions that they perceived to be intrusive and consequently harmful (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2013). Similarly research carried out with HIV patients in the United States has indicated that, while those in need of money are more likely to participate in research if they are paid to do so, paying participants does not diminish their capacity to rationally assess the options open to them (Slomka et al., 2007). Being motivated financially does not impede those in poverty in protecting themselves from any harm associated with research. It seems



that those who debate the various ethical perspectives of participant payment often overlook the autonomy and agentic potential of people involved in research, paternalistically ignoring the ability of participants to make decisions in their own best interests.

A number of writers have suggested that not financially compensating those taking part in research for their time and energy further reinforces the power differential between researchers and participants (Emanuel, 2005; Flicker, Travers, Guta, McDonald & Meagher, 2007; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Paying participants has been acknowledged as a step towards acknowledging the power imbalance between researchers and those participating in the research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Some feminist researchers have noted that participant payment may be a way of recognising those who participate as equal partners in the research (Goodman et al., 2004; Landrine, Klonoff, & Brown-Collins, 1992).

My own decision concerning offering recompense to research participants was made within this context. I decided to offer a supermarket voucher based on participant feedback that I had received working on another research project with beneficiaries (Morton et al., 2014). I then spoke to several women from my own personal network who fitted the research profile (single mothers receiving sole parent support) and asked for feedback on a suitable amount. Moana-o-Hinerangi also discussed this with several Māori single mothers. Involving members of the community being researched in the decision-making process fitted with my intention of making the research process collaborative. We initially suggested NZ\$25. A number of the women commented that given the difficulties they faced in terms of transportation and childcare, NZ\$50 would be more appropriate.

My initial reaction to this amount was one of mild panic. I planned to interview close to 70 women: would I be able to afford to buy 70 NZ\$50 food vouchers? The question of affordability is one that is often used to rationalise non-payment. Anne Ryen (2007) justified her decision to decline participants' requests for payment on the basis that funds were simply not available. On the face of it this seems to be a

fair comment. Anyone who has participated in a research project is aware that funding is hard to come by and funds themselves are often limited. While I had been granted a University of Canterbury Doctoral Scholarship, this was to meet all of the costs of the research. My budget for the focus groups themselves already included travel, accommodation, meeting room bookings and refreshments. On the other hand, I also had to consider that this research was carried out to gain a higher degree, a degree that will (hopefully) advance my career. Career progression in academia is without exception associated with an increase in salary. In New Zealand outside of academia, possessing a post-graduate qualification is positively correlated with annual income (Ministry of Education, 2017). It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that my earnings over the course of my career will comfortably accommodate the NZ\$3500 needed to buy 70 food vouchers. With this in mind, I decided to follow the women's recommendation and offer each participant a supermarket voucher to the value of NZ\$50.

It is impossible to know precisely what impact payment had upon the research. While it certainly generated a lot of attention for the project, as noted above, many of the women who contacted me to express an interest in participating later changed their minds. Offering payment undeniably made participation attractive for those who were committed to taking part. For some participants, the compensation impacted on their ability to attend. Several of the participants had to travel some distance to join a focus group and, at their request, I substituted a petrol voucher for the supermarket voucher. From a researcher perspective, offering compensation was one way in which I was able to acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in this research project. While not diminishing the power imbalance between me and the participants, my hope was that payment assured participants that their time, energy and contribution were integral to the research process.

### **Focus group dynamics**

In general the literature on focus groups recommends organising them around similarities in participant characteristics in order to put people at ease during the

discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Liamputtong, 2011; Smithson, 2000). There was some homogeneity in the groups that I put together. Māori and Pasifika women were offered the choice of ethnicity specific focus groups. The groups held at the University of Canterbury were held with students. While I did not deliberately focus on homogeneity in forming the other groups (other than in relation to the research focus of women receiving Sole Parent Support), women with relationships to a particular organisation were more likely to attend the groups held in those offices.

Although a common connection gave the women a shared focus, participants often came to the groups from very different circumstances. As Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, similarities can in fact mask significant differences. There were several occasions in the early groups when differences between participants appeared to stifle discussion. In the very first focus group (Christchurch Group (1)), two articulate, tertiary educated women dominated the conversation with lengthy discussions around the change in social circumstances that follows a divorce. Their comments appeared to have little relevance for other group members who consequently seemed to disengage from the conversation. In another early group (Christchurch Group (4)) a 20-year age difference between one of the participants and others in the focus group appeared to disconcert the older woman. Despite telling me as she arrived that she had a lot to say, the older woman contributed little to the discussion.

One inherent limitation of focus group research is the potential for the dominance of a few participants to influence the talk of others. While I tried to address this during my moderation of the groups, as the examples above demonstrate, there were several moments when differences in life experiences appeared to limit the contributions of other group members. Based on these incidents, I considered taking more care in arranging the groups, for example, collecting demographic data prior to putting the groups together, but ultimately decided against it. As Braun and Clarke (2013) note some diversity within groups is necessary to ensure lively discussions. While the participants' backgrounds varied, for the most part I did not feel that the women's differences adversely affected the group discussions or the data collected.

As noted above, interactions between focus group participants are an integral part of the focus group method (Smithson, 2000) and may reproduce the merging and forming of individual beliefs that feature in day-to-day conversation (Finch & Lewis, 2003). Frith (2000) has drawn attention to the importance of focus group dynamics: the way that participants will often disagree with and challenge the opinions of other members either directly or indirectly. These dynamics became significant during my analysis. During one focus group, a participant, Michelle, arrived after the discussion had started. She quickly joined the conversation that was taking place about interactions with Work and Income:

### Rural Group

Michelle<sup>21</sup>: ...I found that it's more to do with how I feel 'cause I gave up a good job for my boys and I felt like rubbish, but I've actually been treated really well [by Work and Income caseworkers].<sup>22</sup> They've given me all the benefits that I can qualify for.

Michelle's comments, describing how well she had been treated by staff at Work and Income, were not directly contested by other focus group members. Instead, the women continued with their own accounts in which they reported being treated "disrespectfully" during applications for additional assistance. Michelle was quiet for approximately six minutes. She then recounted a story about having an application for assistance declined, but again reiterated her support for Work and Income staff contending, "they might have down days, off days like we have as well, but I have realised it does come back to how I feel as well". Again no one directly responded to

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<sup>21</sup> All names are pseudonyms and any details that could potentially identify participants have been removed.

<sup>22</sup> In providing examples from the focus groups I have tried as much as possible to record participants' speech as it occurred. In places, however, I have removed words to avoid repetition or added text for clarity.

The following transcription conventions are used:

[Laughs]	Indicates laughter of narrator
[Laughter]	Indicates laughter of two or more people
//	Indicates the point of overlapping speech
Underlined	Emphasis
...	Indicates talk omitted for reasons of brevity
[ ]	Indicates text added for clarity

her comments, and the discussion continued around her. That particular focus group was marked by the twin themes of poverty and problems with Work and Income: the women reiterated how difficult they found it to manage financially, and how case managers frequently failed to inform them of their entitlements.

After another eight minutes, Michelle further contributed to the conversation. She told a story of when she had been on a benefit many years ago and struggled financially because she was not fully informed about what she was entitled to. Her shift in perspective was then tempered by a comment firmly anchoring this experience in the past. In her present situation, in which she cares for the children of a family member, she is treated comparatively better: “maybe [Work and Income] look at it a wee bit differently because they’re not my birth children and I chose to [care for them] to keep them out of the foster care system”. The other participants again did not engage with this. Eight minutes later Michelle then told a story about being refused a grant for new glasses. She noted the impact of the additional stress on her mental health, and of needing the support of her doctor to get the grant approved. Laughing she noted, “maybe I forget all the horrible things”. Her stories from that point on aligned with those of other women in the group.

Collective social interaction is a central part of the focus group research method (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Madriz, 2000). It is impossible to know if Michelle’s change of perspective was a result of re-engaging with her own experiences after hearing the other women’s accounts, or if she felt pressured into changing her stance as the rest of the group worked towards consolidating a collective opinion. As demonstrated in this example, it was often possible to see the women positioning (and repositioning) themselves in relation to the dominant and alternative discourses surrounding welfare receipt. Considering this positioning was an integral part of the analysis and illustrates Wilkinson’s (1998) contention that meaning is co-constructed in focus groups.

Groups understandably did not always share opinions on subjects. While many of the focus groups formed a collective voice, in others there was a clear representation of multiple perspectives:

#### **Auckland Group (1)**

- Lisa: Yeah so I don't have a problem with receiving a benefit at all.  
Jackie: No, me neither.  
Desiree: But it's the attitude//  
Lisa: It's part of me being a Kiwi and not being an African, do you know what I mean?  
Desiree: //It's not that side it's the attitude that comes with it. So when you start//  
Jackie: 'Why should I have to tell them that I'm going overseas?' 'Why should I have to tell them whether I'm taking drugs' or stuff like that?  
Desiree: //Then you start putting your hand out for everything.  
Jackie: Yeah 'I need this' and 'I want this'.  
Lisa: But that just might be like your rights, human rights, just to question. I think it's okay to, I think it's healthy to question, people are just questioning why.  
Jackie: Why they're asking?  
Lisa: Why they're asking, yeah.

In this account participants both employ and reject normative discourses in relation to welfare receipt. The exchange begins in response to an earlier comment by Desiree that those on a benefit often develop "a sense of entitlement". Lisa rejects the suggestion that welfare recipients entertain an unreasonable expectation of privilege. She is not ashamed of receiving a benefit, and argues that she is entitled to receive welfare: "it's part of ... being a Kiwi". Desiree acquiesces slightly "it's not that side". Instead she is referring to an "attitude" of entitlement. Jackie lends her support. She imitates an imaginary beneficiary complaining about Work and Income administrative requirements such as advising staff of overseas trips and pre-employment drug testing. When she and Desiree continue to elaborate on this theme, Lisa objects, questioning such requirements is part of one's "human rights".

Lisa does not directly confront the other women's utilisation of a negative welfare discourse. Instead, she indirectly challenges their argument employing a rights discourse, but softens this with a statement that it's "healthy to question". Her

choice of language, “just might be”, “I think it’s okay” and “people are just questioning” moderates the impact of her utilisation of an alternative discourse. Yet her challenge clearly highlights the difference in the three women’s assumptions. Divergences in opinion appeared on a number of occasions during the groups demonstrating the complexities of the subject discussed. As Jenny Kitzinger (1995) notes this is an important aspect of focus groups as participants disagree with or misunderstand each other, and argue their point of view. Furthermore disagreement and conflict in focus groups are not necessarily negative as differences in opinion indicate that participants are engaged (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Such differences have been argued to be very important from an analytical point of view. Treating “discord as data”, for example, can facilitate an understanding of varying social attitudes and beliefs (Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell, 2000, p.261). The tensions, as exemplified in the two examples above, highlighted the way the women negotiated competing welfare discourses. None of the differences of opinion that manifested during the groups morphed into arguments, as the excerpts above demonstrate, the participants managed their differences of opinion in a respectful way.

Of particular note in relation to the focus group method is the positive feedback I received from many of the participants commenting on the experience of taking part in the discussions. A number of writers have highlighted the way that the sharing of experiences inherent in focus groups can provide support to other group members (Kitzinger, 2000; Liamputtong, 2011; Wilkinson, 1998). At the end of several of the focus groups the women exchanged phone numbers and arranged to stay in touch. One group decided to establish a Facebook group for themselves and others in the same position because “it needs to be done”. Another group spoke of getting together and talking about the subject again because they had enjoyed the discussion so much. Braun and Clarke (2013) note that the experience of participating in a focus group can be empowering as participants come to realise that they are not alone in feeling the way they do, and this certainly seemed to be the case in many of the groups. Social interaction inherent in focus groups has been argued to be particularly appropriate for use with underrepresented or marginalised groups as it gives participants the opportunity to have their voices heard. This

resonates with the feedback I received from many of the women in the groups, who acknowledged the opportunity the focus groups presented to get together and express opinions that largely remained unspoken.

The lively social interaction featuring in many of the groups appeared to make the discussions an enjoyable experience for those who took part. Conversation generally flowed easily and as a result I was able to adopt a relatively passive style of moderation. I paid attention when certain participants dominated the conversation and attempted to draw less vocal women into the conversation, but for the most part I let the women talk. I chose to facilitate talk by asking first for general comments about media representations of women receiving sole parent support. I then moved to more specific questions about the women's personal experiences of life on a benefit (see Appendix 8 for Discussion Guide). I allowed the women a lot of latitude in relation to the questions in order to understand the experience of welfare receipt from their perspective (Bryman, 2004). My intention was to find out what they thought was important about the topic. In my role as moderator I tried to avoid commenting on issues or expressing an opinion, however, as Braun and Clarke (2013) point out the moderator is part of the focus group. This was particularly apparent in the cross-cultural groups and, as I discuss in the following section, there were a number of occasions when my presence significantly impacted on dynamics in the groups.

### **Reflections from the cross cultural focus groups**

Moana-o-Hinerangi co-ordinated and ran the focus groups with Māori women. Food, tea and coffee were supplied, and the women were advised that their children were welcome. The groups began with *mihimihi*<sup>23</sup> when participants were invited to share information about themselves and where they came from. The groups were designed to put the women at ease. There were a number of interruptions: children

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<sup>23</sup> *Mihimihi* are introductory speeches. These involve people offering information about where they come from and their relationships to others. The sharing of *whakapapa* often occurs. *Whakapapa* refers to genealogy and is the basis on which an individual or a group of people determines their identity (Ministry of Justice, 2001; Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori, 2017).



needed to be fed; visitors arrived; the interviews were interspersed with personal anecdotes often unrelated to the research. The relaxed atmosphere was readily apparent throughout these groups. While the participants were nervous and unsure at the group's onset (particularly with me) the informal structure of the groups appeared to quickly put them at ease. Moana's moderation of the group was similar to my own. She loosely followed the interview schedule, but allowed the conversation to range broadly.

Moana's support of the research appeared to allay any suspicions participants may have had about me or my research intentions. Nowhere was this more evident than in the discussions on racism. Prior to the focus groups Moana and I discussed inserting a question on this subject. This manifested itself as "so do your Pākehā friends have the same stories?" or "are there differences between Māori stories and non-Māori stories?" The women were very vocal in their responses, adamant that Pākehā caseworkers at Work and Income treated them differently because they were Māori:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Caitlin: They look at us differently I feel.  
Kiri: But I bet when it comes to Māori language week or Samoan language<sup>24</sup> week they are all up in their brown colleague's faces like//  
Caitlin: Kia ora.<sup>25</sup>  
[Laughter]  
Kiri: // Talofa.<sup>26</sup> Thank you for your karakia.<sup>27</sup> It really touched my heart. Just love our Māori people.

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<sup>24</sup> Language weeks such as Māori or Samoan Language Weeks are celebrated annually in New Zealand and involve the promotion of specific languages in everyday life.

<sup>25</sup> In this context *kia ora* translates from Māori as "hello" (Moorfield, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> *Talofa* is a greeting in Samoan

<sup>27</sup> A *karakia* is a Māori chant or prayer (Moorfield, 2005). Generally karakia are used to ensure a favourable outcome to events such as a meeting or a meal, however karakia are used in many different contexts and can cover every aspect of life. A karakia may be used for spiritual or emotional cleansing, for invoking changes in an object, thing, or the environment (Ministry of Justice, 2001).

In Chapter Eight I analyse this excerpt in more detail in relation to discourses of racism. It is included here to highlight a specific issue relating to cross-cultural research. In this conversation the women speak openly about racism, mocking caseworkers for their insincere attempts at multiculturalism. As a researcher who is not Māori, I was very appreciative of the fact that they were sharing this in front of me. I felt Moana had done an excellent job of putting the participants at ease, and was sure that had I been facilitating the group, the women would not have spoken so freely.

As the women had this and other conversations about racism, however, they continually glanced at me in an apparent attempt to gauge my reaction. I was of course the only Pākehā in the room, and the women were speaking very disparagingly about other Pākehā. While I was fully supportive of the women's comments, I was uncomfortable with the level of attention I received while they made these and other observations about racism. In the first focus group with Māori women, in particular, I was completely unprepared for their sudden and intense interest in me. I was also concerned about how my reaction would be interpreted. In any focus group the reaction of the moderator can impact on group dynamics, particularly when the topic is sensitive (Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell, 2000). My concern was that my uneasiness with suddenly being the centre of attention would be misconstrued and would inhibit rather than encourage talk. I attempted to affect an air of amused interest (and of course unamused interest when they spoke in other places more seriously) and believe that I managed this successfully. This was of course far easier to manage in subsequent focus groups when I was more prepared for the women's shift in focus.

The interviews with Pasifika women were obviously very different to almost all of the other discussions as they were held in groups of two with one individual interview. The clear advantage for me as a researcher was that I had the opportunity in these interviews to probe and ask more follow-up questions. On the other hand, however, these interviews often lacked the liveliness and variety that were features of the other discussions. This was a clear disadvantage in the one-on-one interview

which obviously featured none of the lively group interaction that marked many of the other discussions.

The other two interviews with Pasifika women comprised two participants. Māori Group (3), one of the groups with Māori women, similarly only comprised two participants. These groups also lacked the dynamic atmosphere of the larger group discussions. Yet these conversations still shared some common features with the larger groups. Jean Toner (2009) has written about her experience running focus groups with two participants. She proposes that, “in spite of the small size, the focus group context of purposeful, subject-directed discussion seemed to shape the behavior and interactions of the women involved” (Toner, 2009, p.181). Like Toner (2009) I noted the participant solidarity that was a feature of these groups as the women worked together to construct their accounts. While the atmosphere was very different from the larger groups, the discussions still demonstrated participant interaction that has been proposed to be a feature of focus groups (Wilkinson, 1998). Furthermore the fact that I did have the opportunity in the smaller groups to ask follow up questions meant that the transcripts included some very rich and detailed information about the women’s experiences that offered a significant contribution to my analysis in Chapter Eight.

In two of the interviews with Pasifika women, the participants were, however, noticeably less relaxed in comparison to those taking part in the other groups. While a number of the focus groups were characterised by awkwardness at the beginning, this usually dissipated as the women took control of the discussion. As noted above, focus groups can shift the balance of power and enable participants to direct talk towards their own interests (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Wilkinson; 1998; 2008), and this is certainly what happened in many of the other discussions. I suspect that the awkwardness that was a feature of these interviews with Pasifika women was the combined result of the small size of the group and the fact that I facilitated the discussion. The atmosphere in these interviews was certainly more restrained than in Māori Group (3), the group comprising two Māori participants facilitated by Moana, despite the fact that a Pasifika social worker attended the interviews and

introduced me. It is difficult to know how much my ethnicity impacted on the dynamics, but I suspect that it was a significant barrier to the women being completely at ease. The women who took part in these two interviews spoke English as a second language. They had also experienced some challenging interactions with Work and Income staff members, all of whom were Pākehā. Interviews with these particular women were marked by an atmosphere of unease that persisted well into the group.

The following excerpt from my research journal describing the beginning of one of the interviews with Pasifika women highlights this tension:

The room is small and simply furnished. Scarves decorate the walls only partially hiding cracks from the recent earthquakes.<sup>28</sup> Even though it is the middle of winter and cold outside, the sun streams in heating the room and I feel uncomfortably hot. Everyone looks awkward, uncertain how to act. My attempts at easing the tension by bringing food only seem to add to it. The food is strange – friands. Middle class food from a middle class café. I suddenly realise I've probably spent half of the women's weekly food budget on it. Rose and Tiresa are uncertain what to do with it. Is it a gift or was it for us all to share? They don't know. In the end they put it on a plate and place it on the coffee table. One friand topples over, lying on its side. No one wants to start eating first, and so the whole plate sits there untouched.

While it is commonplace to provide food during focus group discussions, this episode draws attention to the social and cultural implications of doing so. Researchers in New Zealand have similarly noted that in group discussions with people in poverty snacks provided have remained largely uneaten, and surmised that participants may have wanted to take food home to their families (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). Certainly participants in other focus groups I conducted commented that it was a treat to have biscuits and cakes that they could not afford to buy themselves, and my offer to take the remaining food home was always readily accepted. The hesitation over the food in the interview with Rose and Tiresa seemed intensified by the cultural differences: the “strange” food and an uncertainty in relation to cultural norms on both sides. While the social worker and I had discussed bringing food, I

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<sup>28</sup> This interview took place in Christchurch. Christchurch experienced two significant earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 that caused damage throughout the region.

had not thought to ask her what food I should bring and how it should be offered; a mistake I remedied for subsequent interviews.

During my interview with Rose and Tiresa an unexpected visitor provided an indispensable insight into the ways that vulnerable groups may be impacted by a failure to take into account differences in culture and ethnicity. The following description of the interruption is taken from my research journal:

A woman knocks on the door. Rose is very apologetic but it's important that she stop the interview to talk to her. The woman keeps her shoes on, stepping over our boots on the doorstep to get inside. She is from Housing New Zealand<sup>29</sup> and is here to arrange alternate accommodation while the earthquake repairs on Rose's house are carried out. The damage is extensive and Rose and her son will have to move. The woman is white: she looks at me and smiles collegially. She tells Rose about another house that is available. Rose doesn't like the sound of it. It's in a suburb close to the sea; a suburb that was particularly affected by the Christchurch earthquakes. She tells the woman she is worried about the possibilities of tsunamis. Tiresa backs her up. 'All Samoan people are worried about tsunamis' she says. The woman only half hides her derision as she tries to make eye contact with me again. I resolutely look down avoiding her eyes.

It appeared that the Housing New Zealand representative had little awareness of Samoan cultural practices. She left her shoes on in clear violation of the practices in Samoan homes, and she seemed not to realise that Rose might not want to discuss the complexities of her living situation in front of others. It was clear that she found the idea of an entire nation having a fear of tsunamis ridiculous, and she also appeared to think that I would share her derision. Not only did I not – I was aware that there had been a tsunami in Samoa in 2009 that had devastated parts of the island and left 143 people dead – but I felt there were other factors influencing Rose's decision that she may have been too embarrassed to articulate in front of a room full of people. Later I found out that the house proposed for Rose was some distance away from her sister's, one of her main social supports, and Rose did not have a car. The house was also in the same suburb as her ex-husband, a man who had been very violent towards Rose and against whom she had a restraining order.

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<sup>29</sup> Housing New Zealand Corporation is a government agency providing social housing. See also Footnote 74 Chapter Eight.

This interaction was very uncomfortable for me as a researcher. The Housing New Zealand representative appeared to see me as a potential ally, and attempted to bring me into the negotiation with Rose; presumably because I was the only other Pākehā in the room. A Samoan social worker from the Pacific Trust was also present, but the woman did not try to involve her in the discussion. I was aware of my connection to this woman through our shared ethnicity and I was embarrassed by this. I was reminded of a quote by Peggy McIntosh (1988) in one of the most cited pieces of writing on white privilege:

I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race (p.23).

Here McIntosh (1988) argues that many white people do not have to worry about negative racial stereotyping. Yet in stark contrast I was afraid that sharing whiteness with this woman somehow undermined my own credibility as a Pākehā capable of conducting culturally sensitive research.

Unexpectedly, however, after the woman left much of the tension in the focus group appeared to ease, and Rose and Tiresa seemed to be more open. As the women began laughing and joking with me, I realised that in fact the woman from Housing New Zealand may well have done me a favour. In comparing our whiteness, the women were also able contrast the differences in our conduct. When, towards the end of the group, I thanked the women for their participation their replies made it clear that they supported my efforts to highlight some of the difficulties they encountered with the welfare system:

**Pasifika Group (1)**

Claire:	Thank you very much.
Tiresa:	It's okay.
Rose:	After this, make sure you go for Housing New Zealand. [Laughter]

Tiresa:            Make sure you go for Housing New Zealand, [Laughter] and you come back to us. [Laughter]

The women's comments reinforced for me the "privileged information" (Smith, 2012, p.178) that I was receiving during the interviews, and the responsibility I had towards the participants. Rose and Tiresa, like many of the other participants, appeared to believe that their participation in the research was likely to improve other women's interactions with the welfare system. The women's invitation to me to come back into their homes and talk to them should I ever want to carry out research in relation to Housing New Zealand, demonstrated a confidence in me. I wanted to make sure therefore that, to paraphrase Smith (2012), I told their stories well.

My experiences during the discussions with Māori and Pasifika women highlighted the importance of maintaining sensitivity to the impact that a researcher can have on the research. This included engaging with the fact that I was inevitably viewing the research from a perspective influenced by factors such as my upbringing, education, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. A comment that a Māori participant made in relation to lack of trust with Work and Income case managers seemed similarly to apply to me:

### **Māori Group (1)**

Kiri:    If you went to Cashmere High School<sup>30</sup> and you grew up playing tennis, how the hell are you gonna relate to me and my battered woman syndrome and my plenty of Māori cousins' [Laughter] same situation? How are we gonna relate? How am I gonna know that what I say is gonna be captured by you in such a way that I don't feel that my mana<sup>31</sup> is being tarnished?

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<sup>30</sup> Cashmere High School is a school located in an affluent suburb in Christchurch.

<sup>31</sup> *Mana* is a fundamental concept in traditional Māori society. While it has been explained as prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, or charisma (Moorfield, 2005), it is a concept that is difficult to translate into English (Ministry of Justice, 2001). There are a number of types of mana. A person has mana by reason of his or her birth. An individual can also gain mana by their actions, and a person can attain (or lose) mana in relation to groups with which they identify. According to a Ministry of Justice report (2001, p.58) "in the Māori world virtually every activity, ceremonial or otherwise has a link with the maintenance and enhancement of mana".

Egharavba (2001) drew attention to this aspect in her own cross-cultural research with vulnerable women concluding, “further pathologising [participants] was not something I wanted to be a part of”. Taking part in this research emphasised the life experiences that separated me and many of the focus group participants. In the cross-cultural groups this was often exacerbated by differences in ethnicity, culture and, for a number of women, language. I was very aware therefore of approaching all aspects of the research in such a way as to avoid tarnishing the mana of those taking part.

### **Emotion in research**

This thesis is about the emotion and welfare. As the section above indicates, I also became emotionally engaged in the research. Despite being very aware of the vast differences in our lives, there were moments in which I identified with the participants. Many of the women were around my age, some of the women were students, and we were all mothers. I was moved by their stories of hardship, and frequently frustrated by my inability to offer tangible assistance. By its design, qualitative research often involves an emotional engagement with those who take part in the research. As a number of commentators have pointed out, however, this can lead to a tension between involvement and detachment in research (Gemignani, 2011; Liangputtong, 2006). A Western research epistemology emphasises objectivity and impartiality and encourages many researchers to conceal their emotions during the research process (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liangputtong, 2009). While I am aware that feminist researchers such as Jaggar (1989) have challenged the myth of the dispassionate researcher, arguing that emotion plays an important role in research, in conducting (or observing) the focus groups I attempted to maintain a certain degree of impassiveness.

On reflection it seems somewhat ironic that, in a project focusing on emotion, I adhered to this philosophy. While I was affected by the women’s stories, I went to

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great lengths to conceal this, utilising what Arlie Hochschild (1983) has referred to as emotion management during my time with the research participants. These feelings, however, began to spill over into other aspects of my life. The excerpt below from my research journal describes a dinner out with friends following a three-hour focus group discussion:

Danny asks me about my research. I tell her about the discussion today. I can feel myself getting worked up. I know that I am talking too much, but I can't seem to stop myself. While we are ordering craft beer, wine and food without even glancing at the price, the women I spoke to are serving 'doughboys' – bread and water – to their children for dinner. The incongruity makes me angry and Danny starts to look uncomfortable. It's not that she's unsympathetic, but she's had a hard day herself and my intensity is inappropriate for a Friday night dinner with friends.

Research with public health researchers has similarly identified the impact of qualitative research on investigators. In findings that resonate with my own experiences, researchers have reported a range of feelings in relation to their work including guilt, anxiety, and a disconnection from social networks (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

A concern of mine throughout the course of the research was that I was benefiting more from the project than the participants. While their lives would change little after the research, I would be gaining a higher academic qualification with all of the benefits that this confers. Other researchers have also expressed discomfort regarding the "use" of research participants (Sampson, Bloor & Fincham, 2008, p.924). While the literature suggests that this can be ameliorated by assurances that researchers are "giving voice" to the participants, the feeling of somehow failing those who take part often exists. For me this was exacerbated by the expected method of delivery of the research results: a PhD dissertation and publication in academic journals. I was aware that this writing would be vastly different to that expected by many of the participants; my analysis expressed in academic prose would transform the participants' stories into something unrecognisable to them. Many of the women taking part reacted enthusiastically when I spoke about my

intention to publish articles from my thesis. Despite my explanation that these would be in academic journals, I was aware that when they heard the word “publish”, many envisaged the results being disseminated through mainstream media.

The concern about adequately representing the voices of participants has been raised by many qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Liamputtong, 2006). Liamputtong (2006) describes how researchers have begun to experiment with the presentation of their results in order to address this concern. To fulfil what I saw as an obligation to the participants to tell their stories, I decided to begin a blog. At the end of January 2016, I started the website *benefitofthedoubt.co.nz* to deliver some of the research findings. The website includes a number of women’s accounts in their own words. I also write regular posts in which I engage with public debates in relation to welfare, linking these to my own and other relevant research. Making the women’s stories publicly available has enabled me to further invite respondent validation of the data collected (Bryman, 2004), as well as to present the women’s stories in a more accessible format than academic writing. This has not overcome the feeling that I am still gaining more from the research than my participants, but it has at least allowed me to start to deliver the research findings in a way that realises the commitment I made to the participants.

Creating the blog has offered me a way to work through many of the emotions generated from the research. Like other researchers who have begun blogging, my motivation at the outset was to disseminate my research to a broad social network through marketing the site to my peers and the wider public (Kjellberg, 2010; Vannini, 2013). The blog enables me to engage with my research topic in a less formal way and has facilitated connections with social networks interested in the subject of welfare provision. Conducting research takes up emotional energy and elicits many emotions (Hallowell, Lawton & Gregory, 2004). The blog provides me with an outlet to express some of these emotions while giving voice to issues raised by the focus group participants.

### **Organising and analysing the data**

Analysis of the data relied on a number of interconnected approaches. Initially I began with a form of thematic analysis. This involved exploring the relationship between chunks of data relating to my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I began by coding the transcripts: categorising aspects of the data that related to welfare and stigma. I then started making comparisons between the codes and reorganising them in order to highlight connections and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2004). Applying this process allowed me to identify themes that subsequently served as the framework for further analysis. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe themes as organising concepts that emphasise something important about the data in relation to the research question. Early themes that I identified included institutional (treatment) stigma; ill-feeling towards other beneficiaries; shame, tears and anger; the value of citizenship and motherhood; and humour.

I then began to consider these themes within the context of hegemonic discourses discussed in the previous chapter. In the women's responses it was possible to see them drawing upon and reproducing these discourses throughout their discussions. In undertaking this part of the analysis I considered how the women's talk was connected to discursive resources in particular contexts. I asked questions of the data: what discourses did the women articulate within the group discussions? What did these discourses represent in the wider context of welfare provision? I began by examining the way the women discussed their interactions with the welfare system. I noted competing discourses utilised within the focus group context: most notably as the women argued that they deserved assistance and respectful treatment at Work and Income. The women's talk highlighted an attempt to reconcile the divisive nature of means-tested welfare systems that label individuals as either deserving or undeserving of support (Gray, 2016; Rothstein & Stolle, 2001). In identifying these conflicting repertoires, I sought to place the focus group discussions within both local and broader social contexts; an approach associated with a Foucauldian discursive analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005).

As noted in Chapter One, in the early stages of my analysis my focus was on welfare stigma. During the focus group discussions the women spoke extensively about administrative policies and practices associated with Work and Income that they found to be demeaning. My initial analysis focused on participants' talk of the coercive and disciplinary effects of these practices. I considered the way that the women's talk about welfare was organised rhetorically around shame. The women spoke about being embarrassed to be identified as welfare recipients: not wanting to be seen entering Work and Income offices, and hiding the fact that they were using a Work and Income payment card to make purchases. They spoke of other beneficiaries who "wreck the system". This talk was consistent with stigmatising welfare discourses identified in the literature. However as I began to analyse my data, I started to feel that using stigma as an organising concept was limiting my ability to fully describe the women's emotional encounters with welfare discourses and bureaucracy, and their responses to these. While stigma undeniably shaped the women's experiences of welfare, the term began to seem inadequate to describe the myriad of ways in which participants were affected by the welfare system.

As the analysis progressed, I began to pay attention to participants' descriptions of being affected by their experiences of welfare receipt in ways that went beyond a stigma framework. In doing this I started to consider emotion as a unifying theme across the data. When the women spoke of their experiences at Work and Income they often identified a myriad of emotions. There was negative emotion directed at other welfare recipients who the women identified as dishonestly obtaining welfare. There was emotional meaning attached to negotiating the identity of the "shamed" welfare recipient. I considered the way the women spoke about negative flows of affect within the welfare context, and I analysed their talk of the way interactions with the welfare system and welfare administrators made them feel. At the same time, I also paid attention to the way that emotion offered the women a way of responding to their negative experiences of welfare receipt. The following is an early piece of analysis that contributed to my shift in analytic perspective:

### Auckland Group (1)

- Jackie: Oh my God, I never even thought in my head that I was going to be this person on a benefit.
- Desiree: It's horrific eh? The shock.
- Jackie: Then that was it, because of that stigma I was like oh I'm gonna get shit for this, 'oh she just got pregnant to go on a benefit', dah, dah, dah, but it was just like that was my choice and I went in there while I was still pregnant just to sort of see. I was actually really lucky, the Panmure office has actually now burnt someone set it alight.  
[Laughter]
- Desiree: That doesn't surprise me. [Laughter]
- Jackie: Not me, not me. [Laughter]
- Desiree: That totally doesn't surprise me; I've had thoughts. [Laughter]
- Lisa: Burn it.
- Desiree: Honestly you get angry when you get judged. [Laughter]
- Lisa: Yip, yip
- Jackie: Yeah so I went in and the first person I saw was, and I don't want to come across racist or anything like that, but there was this Asian man, he could hardly talk a lot of [English]; I couldn't really understand him anyway. He made it really difficult; I brought in all the papers I was supposed to, I found it very, very overwhelming. I left in tears.

There are a number of references in this excerpt to stigma. Jackie begins by claiming "I never even thought ... that I was going to be this person on a benefit". It is clear that she is painfully aware of rhetoric accusing welfare mothers of deliberately falling pregnant in order to avoid work. Desiree confirms the impact of experiencing stigma "the shock", and later in the discussion Lisa refers to how she reacts to "get[ting] judged".

As I analysed this excerpt, however, I became interested in the work that emotion "did" within the discussion. Jackie responds to the stigma of welfare by emphasising her agentic potential – someone in control of her life – who made the "choice" to get pregnant. Like the other women in her group, she describes feeling shame, but she also describes feelings of anger. The women also share *schadenfreude*, the feeling of enjoyment that comes from the misfortune of others, in relation to news of that someone has started a fire at a Work and Income office. There is laughter throughout the narrative. Jackie's account finishes with a description of leaving her

first meeting at Work and Income in tears. Paying attention to these affective reactions offered the possibility of a rich analysis of the way participants were affected by their engagement with the welfare system, its administrators, and the discourses surrounding welfare receipt. In Chapter Four I examine participants' utilisation of an "affective framework of choosing" (Wilkins, 2014, p.247). I consider the way claiming an alternative identity, as Jackie does in this excerpt, can offer a means of negotiating negative affect. The reference Jackie makes to tears, alongside an examination of shame and anger, became very important to my analysis in Chapter Six; analysis of the women's laughter is covered in Chapter Seven. My analysis still considered the coercive and disciplinary effect of welfare, as I paid attention to the ways in which the women made sense of their experiences, but it also emphasised the role that affect played in their sense-making and their responses.

### **Affective practice**

Wetherell (2012, p.4) has proposed an approach for those looking to undertake empirical research relating to discourse, affect, and emotion that she has labelled "affective practice". Affective practice is a focus on the "emotional as it appears in social life". Wetherell (2012, p.13) proposes that affect is "practical, communicative and organised", and so advocates paying attention to the practices that are often part of the normal back and forward making up social interaction. Wetherell's (2012) book *Affect and emotion* provides an extensive explanation of affective practice. Her writing emphasises the advantages offered to researchers in paying attention to both discourse and affect, prompting us to question how "social formations grab people" (Wetherell, 2012, p.2). Analyses focusing solely on discourse, Wetherell (2012) claims, may fail to account for the lively and capricious actions that make up social interaction: the way that human actors react as they interact. On the other hand, analyses concentrating on affect may not pay attention to the social patterning of each encounter shaped by past experiences or social formations. Wetherell (2012) identifies the suitability of this approach for research, like mine, involving situations where there is much talk about emotion and feelings. Affective

practice highlights the liveliness of social life while also drawing attention to patterns within social settings. Wetherell (2012) writes:

The study of affect is inextricably to do with the study of pattern. These are patterns which are multiple, dynamic, intersecting, sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal. (p.16)

In my analysis I was interested in the patterned ways in which emotion was configured in the focus groups and within the welfare setting. In analysing the data I considered the formations that emerged in the women's talk as they made sense of their interactions with the welfare system and welfare administrators. I paid attention to the way participants spoke of responding to these interactions and how emotion was often implicated in this talk. As I analysed the data, I focused on the women's descriptions of their emotional responses. I considered how these reactions were at times dynamic and unexpected, but also how they often coalesced into affective-discursive configurations. I was interested in attending to patterned modes of activity in which affect and discourse were intertwined. Affective practice as an analytic method was flexible enough to guide analysis of a range of emotional responses: from Jackie's reformation of identity using an "affective framework of choosing" (Wilkins, 2014, p.247), to her shame morphing into tears, to her laughing with the rest of the group about burning down a building.

Vik Loveday (2016) has utilised affective practice to explore the lived experiences of shame. She argues that theorising shame in this way enabled her to analyse it relationally, rather than conceptualising it as permanently residing within bodies. In her study she considered the embodiment of emotion as inherently related to the social production of class. Similarly Jean McAvoy (2015) has considered tears (crying) and talk as interrelated affective discursive practice. In her analysis she related these practices to the interview context, to a participant's individual history and to wider social discourses. Like these researchers, in my analysis I was interested in "*embodied meaning-making*" (Wetherell, 2012, p.4 emphasis in the original) as I

sought to highlight participants' experiences of welfare through examining how they were affected by its delivery.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined many of the decisions I made as I moved through the research process. My intention from the early stages of this process was to submit my practice to critical reflection in order to ensure the interests of the research participants were at the forefront of my research decisions. I was working with vulnerable women and I wanted to make sure that this was taken into account at all stages of the process. This chapter has also detailed how I engaged Māori and Pasifika women in the research. Within the chapter I have highlighted the ways that my values, background and education impacted on the research. In laying this open to scrutiny, my aim is to make my role in the construction of research knowledge as visible as possible (Ortlipp, 2008).

The recognition of power dynamics was a central concern throughout the research. Offering participants payment and holding focus groups were two of the ways that I attempted to address the inherent power differential during the planning stages. Having a discussion with other women in the same situation was potentially less daunting for the participants than engaging in a question and answer session with me as a researcher. I also felt that the shift in balance of power enabled the women to direct the conversation towards many of their own concerns. Certainly it was never my intention to focus on the Work and Income environment in so much depth, yet as the forthcoming analysis demonstrates, this was a subject to which the women returned time and time again in each of the groups.

A key starting point for my analysis involved an examination of the dynamics of group talk. Considering the ways in which the women challenged each other's attitudes concerning welfare highlights how those who rely on a benefit must continually negotiate competing welfare discourses. The following chapters draw attention to how these discourses shaped the way participants made sense of their



experiences of welfare receipt, as they described being affected in both positive and negative ways. Within these chapters I consider the emotional formations that emerged and affective practices utilised as the participants discussed their experiences of receiving welfare.

## The affective economy of welfare<sup>32</sup>

There's no value put on the job I'm doing [as a parent] and they're paid by the taxpayer too at WINZ<sup>33</sup> ... but I'm also doing a worthwhile job, it's just not viewed that way by society (Piper, Rural Group).

This chapter is framed by Sara Ahmed's (2014) metaphor of an affective economy in considering how affect circulates and attaches to individuals in ways that can be both beneficial and detrimental. In utilising this metaphor in relation to welfare provision, I consider the negative feeling that accumulates around lone mothers on welfare, focusing on the way participants felt, as Piper points out, that they had little value within this context. I use the term "value" to refer to the specific concept of economic exchange, and to the less precise notion of what matters to people (Skeggs, 2011). Both understandings of the term are relevant here. The provision of welfare in this country is an economic arrangement whereby the state provides financial support to those deemed to be in need. Welfare receipt is, however, inherently related to valuing practices: dependence upon welfare reduces a person's social value. This chapter considers the ways in which women in the focus groups attempted to negotiate their "person value" (Skeggs, 2004; 2011) as they discussed their experiences of receiving welfare.

In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Ahmed (2014) introduces the metaphor of the affective economy. This metaphor offers a way of understanding the accumulation of affect. In economic terms the circulation and exchange of money

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<sup>32</sup> Portions of this chapter are forthcoming in Gray, C. (in press) *The Affective Economy of Welfare in New Zealand. New Zealand Sociology*.

<sup>33</sup> WINZ is an acronym for Work and Income New Zealand

generates capital. Similarly, Ahmed (2014) argues, affect increases as it circulates and in the process produces affective capital:

Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become. (p.45)

This metaphor emphasises the way that a figure, like the welfare mother, can generate increasing amounts of negative affect over time. In this chapter I consider the way that participants experienced this negative feeling circulating around them and shaping their experiences of welfare receipt. I propose that this feeling is a consequence of the association of lone mothers with the recurring and persistent “sign” or figure of the welfare mother who drinks and smokes, refuses to work, and neglects her children. The more we hear of this symbolic figure in the media, political rhetoric and popular culture, the more negative affect accumulates around her. This figure has come to represent all welfare mothers. Individual beneficiaries then become constituted through their alignment with the collective (Ahmed, 2014).

In Ahmed’s (2014, p.209) discussion of how emotion forms the contours of social and bodily space, she proposes that people (or things or places) can be objects of emotion and as such can become saturated with affect. When something is saturated with affect it is “sticky” with meaning. The notion of stickiness is important in my analysis, it is a metaphor that highlights the way in which historical associations can attach to a person, binding them to others, and blocking further movement. Ahmed’s (2014) metaphor of “stickiness” offers a way of understanding how affect attaches to some bodies, but not others. Ahmed (2014, p.92) gives the example of the word “Paki” - an abbreviation of the word Pakistani – that has become derisive in the United Kingdom through its association with other words such as “immigrant, outsider [and] dirty”. The connection between all of these words has become so strong over time that they “stick” together. Only the word “Paki” now needs to be spoken to invoke these other meanings. Ahmed (2014) writes:

When the body of another becomes an object of disgust, then the body *becomes* sticky. Such bodies become 'blockages' in the economy of disgust: they slow down or 'clog up' the movement between objects as other objects and signs stick to them. (p.92 emphasis in original)

Ahmed's (2014) representation of negative affect as sticking more to some bodies than others is an integral part of the framing in this chapter. I connect the bad feeling adhering to welfare mothers to dominant social and political discourses surrounding the receipt of welfare. I argue that the negative affect that circulates and attaches itself to the figure of the welfare mother blocks other more positive emotions from "sticking", impacting on the value lone mothers are able to accrue in their social relationships.

In this chapter I begin by drawing attention to the way that participants in my research struggled to negotiate the negative affect associated with welfare receipt. I then move to consider how the women attempted to utilise the positive affective value associated with other aspects of their identity, specifically that attending to neoliberal citizenship to increase their affective capital and counteract the impact of welfare discourses. Skeggs' (2004; 2011) notion of "person value" is useful here in understanding the way that "personhood" is negotiated through social presentations that facilitate the identification of value. Skeggs (2011) argues that through such performances people strive to emphasise their social worth. My analysis considers this performance of personhood as the women discussed representations of welfare mothers in social or mass media, gave accounts of their interactions with friends and family, and talked about their dealings with Work and Income. I consider the affective labour (Wilkins, 2014) that took place as participants attempted to negotiate value by constituting themselves as neoliberal citizens. This notion of labour offers a way of conceptualising the process through which participants attempted to counter the negative affect associated with being a beneficiary and further extends Ahmed's (2014) economic metaphor. I argue that the association of

individuals with negative or positive affect generates affective capital and offers a way of organising social reality.

### **Welfare mothers and negative affect**

As noted above, Ahmed (2014) argues that affect does not reside within people or things, but is produced as it circulates. Affect accrues as it becomes associated with certain objects or figures – in this discussion the dependent mother on welfare – and becomes stronger as time passes. Over time the figure of the welfare mother has accumulated negative affect. There is, what McCormack (2004) refers to as a “common sense” understanding of welfare recipients, and it is not complimentary. Words such as “scrounger” and “bludger” “stick” to many people receiving benefits linking them to common historical accounts of welfare recipients. Welfare mothers are also accused of immorality and poor parenting, intensifying the negative feeling surrounding their economic dependence on the state. As discussed in Chapter One, the “intensely affective” character of the welfare mother has subsequently become fixed in the public imagination producing and mediating anti-welfare sentiment (Jensen & Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2008). This figure not only lacks value herself, but is also seen as a drain on public funds, resources that could well be used to meet the needs of more valued citizens.

It was apparent from discussions within the focus groups, that participants felt constrained by their association with the figure of the welfare mother prevalent within welfare discourse in this country:

#### **Auckland Group (2)**

- Amanda: Actually going back to the thing about what you hear in the media there is this perception that particularly women on solo benefits have lots of cash that they don't have to do anything and there's this//
- Gina: Free money
- Amanda: This free money and that it's this sweet life but I just found it constant stress and //
- Penny: Grind
- Amanda: // constant struggle. Just always worrying about the next week, that we were gonna be okay and being kicked out of

houses and having old bills to try and pay back with no more income. Just constant[ly] trying to hold it all together with the just relentlessness of parenting by yourself.

### **Christchurch Group (3)**

- Tracey: On generic media it's not very positive. In fact I have a terrible habit of going down to the Stuff<sup>34</sup> comments and then shouting at the computer about the money grabbing solo mums who are out there who pop out baby year after year in order to live the high life, whilst drinking and smoking and watching TV all day long. I wish. [Laughter]
- Ashleigh: Pretty much what I've heard. [Laughter]

### **Pasifika Group (3)**

- May: Bludgers is probably the main thing that I hear. Being lazy as well. People don't, for younger mums, don't see the value as much of a parent in regards to older parents. That's my opinion. Probably the main ones are bludging and laziness.
- Vaiala: I think sometimes [the media] portray it as single mothers on a benefit, that's a career for them. That once their baby gets to four or five they try and have another baby and that keeps them in this loop of receiving a benefit. But it's just a massive lack of understanding of who we are or who I was when I was on a benefit.

The figure of the welfare mother dominates these accounts. She emerged in the discussions as lazy and dishonest, producing children in order to secure an income without having to work. Tracey recounts reading public comments to this end on a news website. May highlights the lack of value particularly ascribed to young, single mothers. Amanda, May, and Vaiala all draw attention to the negative media reports and social media posts that they regularly encounter.

Common to the focus group accounts was a rejection of the relevance of this figure to the reality of their own lives. Amanda is clearly denying any suggestion that raising children on welfare is a comfortable life. It is not "free money and ... [a] sweet life": life is tough. With the support of others in the group, she argues that mothers receiving sole parent support are constantly worried about the insufficiency of their income and, combined with the pressure of raising children without a partner, life is

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<sup>34</sup> "Stuff" is a New Zealand news website.

“constant stress and constant struggle”. Tracey speaks of “shouting at the computer” when encountering negative comments about welfare mothers on media websites. Vaiala argues that such discourses show a lack of understanding of “who we are”. The women are cognisant of the challenges involved in parenting alone and managing on a restricted budget, and appear to resent the implication that they are lazy.

While the women stressed that the harsh reality of life on a benefit was a far cry from that depicted in mainstream and social media reports, they also seemed very aware of how difficult it was to distance themselves from the symbolic figure of the welfare mother. The negative value that circulates and attaches itself to them through their reliance on welfare is difficult to shift:

#### **Rural Group**

- Michelle: Family and friends go, ‘Oh those people on the benefit, they should do this and that, oh but you’re different’. [Laughter]  
Piper: Yeah we’re all different eh? [Laughter]  
Michelle: ‘You’re different, you’re a special case’. Oh okay. (Laughter)

#### **Wellington Group**

- Amy: Yeah, not everyone knows that you’re on the benefit or they go, ‘all these people do this except for you of course’. [Laughter]  
Kirsten: It’s almost like, ‘beneficiaries, no, not you, those beneficiaries’ [Laughter] and you’re like ‘but how is it different?’ [Laughter]  
Amy: I get that a lot too, the ‘beneficiaries but not you’. [Laughs]

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

- Stephanie: I had that drug-testing thing<sup>35</sup> with my family the other day, [Laughs] with my aunty and cousins saying, ‘Ah, they should be drug tested, everybody on benefits, blah, blah, blah’. And I was like, ‘you realise I’m on the benefit?’ And they’re like, ‘No, you don’t count’. [Laughs] And it’s like, ‘Yes, I do. So I’m gonna have to go in and get drug testing?’ and they’re like,

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<sup>35</sup> In 2012, it was announced that from July 2013 sanctions would be applied to beneficiaries who refused to apply for jobs requiring a pre-employment drug test. Then Minister of Social Development Paula Bennett announced that “Welfare reforms are resetting expectations and obligations and recreational drug use is simply not an acceptable excuse for avoiding available work” (Bennett, 2012). The policy provoked wide spread media discussion, and was criticised by beneficiary advocates for being based on populist appeal and economically unsound (see for example “Drug-testing policy”, 2014).

‘No, not you, just everybody else’. [Laughter] Are you aware what’s wrong with you?

As with the excerpts above, the similarity in these three accounts is striking. The women all share experiences in which they have witnessed friends and family denounce beneficiaries. While these criticisms were accompanied by perfunctory attempts to separate them from other welfare recipients, the women acknowledge the futility of such efforts. In fact, the attempts are so pointless as to be ridiculous. In Chapter Seven I examine humour and laughter and the way it served to engage participants moving them closer together and establishing a sense of “affective solidarity” (Graefer, 2014, p.118). Similarly the laughter in these accounts appears to unite the women as they mock friends and family for inept attempts at covering up their disparaging comments. Piper’s quip “we’re all different eh” relies on the other women recognising the irony of that statement and their laughter indicates that they do. They are not so different after all. They are very aware that the negative affect of welfare dependence is attached to all beneficiaries, and it is unlikely to suppose that the “stickiness” of disgust at the symbolic welfare mother will simply “slide” over them (Ahmed, 2014). As Stephanie points out in her imagined response to her relatives, “are you aware what’s wrong with you?” This is so self-evident that it seems ludicrous to pretend otherwise.

### **Negotiating affective alignments**

While the women insisted that their lived reality was very different from that constructed around the figure of the symbolic welfare mother, their objections were often inconsistently voiced in relation to other beneficiaries. Indeed in Vaiala’s statement above, while she is adamant that welfare discourse represents “a massive lack of understanding of who we are”, she qualifies this with the statement “or who I was when I was on a benefit”. Such is the strength of the rhetoric surrounding welfare dependency that many of the women often simultaneously echoed common opinions about lazy, work-shy welfare mothers:



### **Christchurch Group (2)**

Tania: I mean, I've got friends that are on [the benefit] and for them it is a lifestyle, they've got no motivation to get off their bum and get a job, or study; they're just there...

### **Auckland Group (2)**

Penny: Some people I know probably do wreck it for others because there are those people I understand that do wreck the system, which sucks.

Mandy: They are such a tiny percentage//

Rachelle: Exactly

Penny: Yeah yeah

Mandy: //for a shit amount of money, seriously. It's a tiny percentage of people who do, who can.

Rachelle: And they just act like it's their thing//  
[talking]

Penny: It's those people that have ruined it for us ultimately.

Mandy: Actually it's the government that have ruined it for us actually.

In both accounts the women attempt to distance themselves from the symbolic figure of the welfare mother who “wreck[s] it for others”. Directly preceding her statement, Tania had been explaining how difficult it was to manage financially on a benefit. She commented that “it’s all good for the media to just say that [being on a benefit is a lifestyle choice], but they don’t actually live like we do, you know?”

Tania’s statement about friends who treat the benefit like “a lifestyle” with “no motivation” to get off welfare seems at odds with her former comments. Yet both statements formed part of her account of applying for a benefit after a relationship breakdown. She explained that she was “utterly embarrassed” by having to enter Work and Income for the first time: “I had to walk in there it was just like I really don’t want to”. She recalled looking at other Work and Income clients and thinking, “you seem to deserve this appointment more than I do”. Implicit in Tania’s account is the realisation that in applying for welfare support she may be perceived in the same negative way that she has previously viewed other welfare recipients. She seemed discomforted by her association with other women in need of welfare

assistance, and her ensuing comments can be seen as an attempt to separate herself from such women.

In the second excerpt Penny raises the possibility that she is treated poorly at Work and Income because others have attempted to fraudulently claim entitlements in the past. When Mandy objects to this suggestion, and Rachelle appears to support the objection, Penny backs down from her position. However as it becomes clear that Rachelle's response of "exactly" was directed towards Penny's claim rather than Mandy's retort, Penny swiftly jumps again to blaming women who have allegedly taken grants to which they are not entitled. These women "have ruined it" for other beneficiaries. Penny is a young mother of five children to several different fathers. In her situation she appeared to be particularly vulnerable to the shaming impact of welfare discourses, and seemed very aware of how she was constituted within these. At other times during the focus group, she recounted being treated rudely by a number of service providers, including Work and Income: "just the tone and the way that they look at you – I'm just over it". Penny seemed to realise that as a young mother with multiple children to different fathers she has much in common with the affective figure of the welfare mother. Like Tania, she attempts to separate welfare mothers into those who are deserving of assistance and those who are not. Engaging with the deserving/ undeserving discourse, and distancing herself from the undeserving appeared to be one way in which Penny could make sense of her treatment by welfare caseworkers, and her frequent inability to constitute herself in any other way.

Tania and Penny were not alone in drawing on anti-welfare sentiment to distance themselves from other welfare recipients. A number of the focus group participants similarly contrasted their own attitudes and behaviours with those of the symbolic welfare mother:

### **Christchurch Group (3)**

Ashleigh: I'm just grateful for what I get so that's my main reasoning of not wanting to go in [to Work and Income] I can't be bothered with dealing with them but mainly just I'm thankful for what I

get so I just make do. I've got a good supportive family so they help me out where I need it.

Tracey: What about the stuff you're entitled to though?

Taylor: But it's different for everybody

Ashleigh: Yeah I don't really see it like that. I don't know. I don't see it so much as an entitlement. I just see I get what I'm given and I make do. Unexpected expenses come up but my parents are so good, they'll let me borrow and just drip-feed it back to them. They know I'll always pay them back, it will take forever on that money [Laughter] but//

Taylor: You've just got to learn to live within your means don't you? You know this is what you're getting each week so you live to that, it's just when the unexpected stuff pops up.

Ashleigh: Yes and I'm good at budgeting so that helps [Laughs]

Claire: So you feel a little bit differently?

Tracey: I see it as a price of citizenship. I'm a citizen of New Zealand, I'm entitled. When I get off I'll be happily paying taxes back but like with the dental grant there's no way on earth I could afford to get any dental work done.

#### **Auckland Group (1)**

Desiree: But once you're on a benefit you're more susceptible to having a sense of entitlement and I've noticed that in myself as well. So you really have to watch yourself that you don't start slipping into that mould.

Jackie: Oh think that you're entitled to//

Desiree: Yeah big time and I've been caught in it.

Lisa: I think there's two sides for me to that sense of entitlement, I don't know, are you interested in that or not?

Claire: Absolutely.

Lisa: I just think I'm actually quite comfortable with that sense of entitlement side and then not with another side of it. As a 4th generational New Zealander I feel quite entitled to help that's there if I'm entitled to it in that sense.

Desiree: Yeah that's the good sense of entitlement. Yes you are respected as a New Zealander//

Lisa: Yeah so I don't have a problem with receiving a benefit at all

Jackie: No, me neither.

Desiree: But it's the attitude//

In the first excerpt Ashleigh begins by expressing gratitude for her benefit accompanied by the assertion that she does not need to claim further entitlements. When she requires additional assistance, she has the support of her family who will "help me out where I need it". Tracey interrupts to ask why she does not try to claim

assistance beyond her basic benefit: there are after all a number of grants that she may well be eligible for. For Ashleigh, however, welfare is not an “entitlement”, it is instead something “I’m given and I make do with”. Implicated in this discussion is the existence of the welfare mother who is continually asking for additional support because she does not budget well, nor live within her means. This figure of the welfare mother similarly dominates the second excerpt. Here the debate also appears to hinge on the definition of the word “entitlement”. While entitlement has historically been used synonymously with social security, as welfare reform in New Zealand has become increasingly punitive the term has come to be associated with the more negatively charged term “sense of entitlement”. This is highlighted in Desiree’s account. Those on welfare – including herself – are susceptible to harbouring unreasonable expectations. She explains this later in the discussion as “putting your hand out for everything”.

Ashleigh’s assertion that she can manage on welfare because she is “good at budgeting”, and Desiree’s insistence that those on a benefit are “more susceptible to having a sense of entitlement” implies that beneficiaries who approach Work and Income for additional assistance are poor financial managers, or are simply demanding assistance that they do not really need. In other places in the discussion, however, both Ashleigh and Desiree acknowledged the need for additional support, and outlined their struggles with Work and Income to obtain this assistance. Their benefit is simply not sufficient to cover the “unexpected expenses” that regularly come up, no matter how well they budget. Their accounts of approaching Work and Income for assistance were marked by negative experiences with caseworkers who appeared to treat them as if they were the imagined beneficiary who regularly demands unwarranted support. It was in these places that the futility of the women’s distancing tactics became apparent. While affirming the existence of welfare recipients with “the attitude” may have offered the women a way of making sense of their own treatment in the welfare context, expressing gratitude and budgeting well is not enough to distance them from the symbolic figure of the welfare mother. Echoing moral judgements in relation to welfare does not displace the negative affect that adheres to all welfare recipients. Instead of “unsticking”

from the deserving, this affect adheres indiscriminately to all who collect welfare payments.<sup>36</sup>

Behavioural explanations for poverty dominate welfare discourse and not surprisingly influence the views and language of those on welfare (Chase & Walker, 2013; Pemberton, Fahmy, Sutton & Bell, 2016). As Pemberton et al. (2016) argue, a common response amongst beneficiaries is to create discursive distance between themselves and “the imagined ‘other’” in an attempt to mitigate the impact of discourses surrounding poverty and welfare dependency. The incongruity of women utilising such distancing strategies while simultaneously struggling to manage the “constant stress and grind [and] constant struggle” of life on welfare illustrates the complexity of negotiating negative affect. Welfare discourses have persisted over time, not because they are grounded in reality, but because they easily capture the imagination. The ambiguity of such explanations enables them to be reshaped in a variety of different situations (Pemberton et al., 2016). Ironically, however, welfare recipients’ utilisation of such discourses can be seen to authenticate common sense understandings of welfare. Reinforcing the existence of benefit cheats by providing examples of friends who use the benefit as “a lifestyle”, or emphasising the poor budgeting skills and sense of entitlement of others on welfare, can work to further differentiate beneficiaries’ behaviours and values from those of others in society increasing the negative affect that “sticks” to all who depend on welfare.

### **Citizenship entitlement, welfare and work**

In an affective economy, however, it is not only negative affect that circulates. The term affective economy can be used to describe the work that emotions do through

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<sup>36</sup> Chunn and Gavigan (2004), make a similar argument in relation to welfare fraud. They draw attention to the growing focus on welfare cheats in modern neo-liberal societies. Since the 1980s, there has been a shift in public discourse linking poverty, welfare and crime. The authors argue that all welfare recipients are stigmatised by policy designed to deter benefit fraudsters and tighten eligibility criteria for benefits. It does not matter that the vast majority of welfare recipients have legitimate claims, such policy conveys the impression that fraud is widespread and that a constant surveillance of those on welfare is required. As a result, they argue, welfare receipt has become synonymous with welfare fraud.

the intensity of both negative and positive associations. Within affective economies, affective labour is performed as individuals attempt to maximise their capital by tapping into aspects of their identity that are seen to have value. Skeggs (2011) describes such efforts as social performances involving the delineation between “proper and improper selves”. For Tracey and Lisa, in the accounts above, this performance involves an emphasis on their New Zealand citizenship. Tracey asserts, “I’m a citizen of New Zealand, I’m entitled [to welfare]”. Lisa argues that, “as a 4th generational New Zealander I feel quite entitled to help that’s there”. The women employ a social rights discourse arguing that as New Zealand citizens the receipt of welfare should not be seen as demeaning, but rather a privilege afforded them on account their nationality. Welfare provision is inherently connected to citizenship and, historically, entitlement to welfare support in this country has been predicated upon one’s citizenship.

The other women in these focus groups, however, appeared less willing to draw on their New Zealand citizenship in their performance of “personhood”. While in other places in her focus group Desiree spoke of being “entitled to help from the government”, here she only concedes that being a New Zealand citizen affords “respect” as she creates discursive distance between herself and those beneficiaries who continually ask for support. For Ashleigh welfare is definitely not an “entitlement” it is instead something “I’m given and I make do with.” Taylor agrees: entitlement is not something that is granted on the basis of one’s citizenship but is “different for everyone”. For these women the notion of citizenship entitlement seems overwhelmed by their performance of neoliberal citizenship. As outlined in Chapter One, neoliberal citizens emphasise their individuality, and own the responsibility to be independent self-governing agents. Neoliberal citizens do not draw from the state for support but instead contribute to the economy through taxation and consumption. As the accounts above also demonstrate, neoliberal citizenship is established not only by being independent and self-sufficient, but also by displaying the appropriate feelings. This involves directing moral judgements towards those unable to generate sufficient economic capital to be self-supporting,

and who are seen to have little value (both economically and affectively) in a neoliberal economy.

In Chapter Two, I outlined the way that measures of economic utility have come to dominate understandings of everyday life. The influence of neoliberalism on welfare policy in New Zealand has seen a move from a language of entitlements to one of individualism and mutual obligation (Hackell, 2007; Hartman, 2005), and so it is not surprising this was reflected in the focus group discussions. As I have previously noted, in welfare discourse the figure of the lone mother is implicitly contrasted with that of a self-sufficient industrious neoliberal citizen. Neoliberal discourses of autonomy and self-reliance, that are so dominant in current welfare policy, appear to have influenced the way that participants in the research view both the notion of welfare entitlement, and other women who are reliant upon the state for support. Ashleigh is clearly asserting her neoliberal subjectivity. Her independence is underscored in many places: she budgets well, pays back any borrowed money, and does not ask for additional support. Taylor's account is similarly marked by a neoliberal rationale: entitlements are not rights as Tracey asserts and beneficiaries should "learn to live within [their] means".

The performance of a neoliberal subjectivity was prevalent throughout the group discussions to varying degrees. In Tracey's account even as she vehemently emphasises her citizenship entitlement, she moderates this with talk of economic reciprocity. She states her intention to work when she graduates and claims that she will reimburse the state when she begins to pay tax. Patterson (2004) refers to a group of mothers in her New Zealand based research as "citizen-workers": women for whom the paid work they had done, and would do again in the future, was an important part of their constituted identities. Similarly a number of the women who took part in my focus groups, like Tracey, constituted themselves as workers (past, present or current) in order to support their claims for assistance:

### **Christchurch Group (2)**

Ana: I actually felt that I should be entitled to [welfare] 'cause I've worked since I was about 13 [Laughter] part time – work to

work to work – and I’m 38 and I thought for a time surely this is okay. [Laughs] But then I quickly learnt that I shouldn’t approach it with that attitude. [Laughter]

**Pasifika Group (3)**

Vaiala [Welfare is] a means to an end and once I do start working ... I’m happy to pay tax to support others. It’s like a cycle of support rather than someone bludging off my work.

**Rural Group**

Leah: [The Work and Income caseworker] she’s only young and I’ve been in the workforce longer than she’s been alive and she’s looking down her nose at me like I’m some sort of bludging scumbag. It was disgusting and I told that manager that. I said, ‘I’m not going to be treated like that by WINZ workers when I’ve been in the workforce since I was 13’.

In the accounts above, these women, like Lisa and Tracy, make claims to entitlement, but these claims are based on a reciprocal relationship with the state. The women emphasise their past employment or future intention to work. Moreover, as Leah’s account highlights, as a worker she should be entitled to some respect: she is not “some sort of bludging scumbag”. Instead she, like Ana, has been in the workforce since she was 13. The women contend that they should be entitled to welfare on this basis: they have demonstrated their commitment to self-reliance and economic independence from the state.

Inherent in these accounts, however, is an acknowledgement of the tenuous basis of this claim. Ana describes her experiences at Work and Income teaching her not to approach [welfare receipt] with an attitude of entitlement despite having worked since she was a teenager; Vaiala’s utilisation of the word “bludging” brings the negative spectre of the welfare dependent lone mother into her account; Leah similarly uses the word “bludging” and relates laying a complaint when her extensive work history was disregarded by a Work and Income caseworker. The women may claim they are performing neoliberal citizenship but even as they do so they acknowledge the instability of this claim. Indeed as they themselves admit, the capacity to work does not inherently bestow value on an individual. Rather, as Skeggs (2011) claims apropos of Marx, the value of work can only be claimed in its



exchange. The women may have been workers in the past, they may intend to work in the future but, as they themselves are aware, this has little worth in the welfare context while they are still beneficiaries.

### **Negotiating positive affect**

Although the women in the focus groups appeared to concede that participation in paid employment did not offset the negative affective value of welfare receipt, this does not mean that they gave up in their efforts to negotiate “person value”. As Skeggs (1997; 2004; 2011) has argued in relation to her research with working class women, those unable to perform respectability in economic terms do not abandon attempts to characterise themselves as having worth. In my own research, participants’ performance of “personhood” involved an emphasis on the productivity involved in other areas of their lives:

#### **Māori Group (1)**

Jessie: Yeah. A lot of people automatically assume because you’re on a benefit you’re a bum and doing nothing; lazy doing nothing, should be out there working. There’s a lot more to it than that ... ’cause I find it already hard enough being on the benefit. I’d love to be working and stuff but just trying to get my studies and that finished, there’s no way I can juggle study, four kids and work at the same time.

#### **Auckland Group (1)**

Desiree: I am not a super mum. I can’t study, work and do the kids. I’ve just tried that and got made redundant and flunked my last two papers. When life conditions crop up it’s hard, you can’t just go hang on life, I’ve got a paper to get out and I’ve really got to go to work today, oh crap one of the kids is sick...It’s just me and I’m responsible for my things but you do, you get stigmatised all the time through every media outlet, through people, friends, everyone. Everyone judges because they haven’t been in the position.

#### **Auckland Group (2)**

Amanda: I found it really hard too because I was studying full-time, so separated from my partner, still in the midst of this full-time study, kept it up while having my son in day care three days a week and he’s only ever been three days a week and I do a 40 hour week in those three days so we can have two days at home together. So I’m doing all this study, I still have to pay

childcare even though I'm studying, I'm not working. There's no extra support if you're studying, the days of Paula Bennett's<sup>37</sup> training incentive allowance is long gone.

On first reading, there seems little positivity in these accounts: they are redolent with frustration. The women seem to be aware that they are being held accountable to a normative standard against which, they argue, failure is unavoidable. For Jessie there is "no way" she can "juggle" all of her responsibilities and work at the same time. Desiree tried to do just that and in the process failed her study and lost her job. Amanda recounts the difficulty of managing full-time study and parenting. All three women emphasise how challenging it is to manage their various obligations with little financial or social support. Yet at the same time their arguments do some very important discursive work. The women respond to their implied laziness by emphasising the labour they already perform. Predictably, given the prominence of work in current New Zealand welfare policy, the women construct their arguments utilising concepts of effort and productivity. All three of the excerpts are organised around this theme. While the women highlight their failure at economic independence, they draw attention to the labour that they already perform. They are all studying; they are all raising children. Their lives are busy and they are highly productive. In Desiree's words "It's just me and I'm responsible for my things".

### **Study**

These women, like more than half of the focus group participants, identified as students. While two groups were recruited at the University of Canterbury, many participants in other groups were enrolled in, or asserted an intention to enrol in, study of some description. Utilising what Skeggs (1997, p.82) has called "improving narratives" many of the women used their interest in education as a means of emphasising their individual growth and productivity. Furthermore, claiming a

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<sup>37</sup> As noted in Footnote 35 of this chapter, Paula Bennett was Minister of Social Development at the time the focus groups took place. Bennett was herself a sole mother reliant upon welfare for a number of years during which time she attended university. Here Amanda is referring to amendments to the Training Incentive Allowance made during Bennett's time as Minister of Social Development. The changes resulted in the allowance no longer being available for long-term courses of study such as university degrees.

student identity enabled the women to align themselves with the values of neoliberalism. Productive neoliberal citizens are measured not only by their ability to pay tax, but also by their consumption of goods and services (Hackell, 2007). The restructuring of higher education in New Zealand during the late 1980s, and the introduction of tuition fees, constituted students as purchasers of education. The potential for education to improve one's economic prospects, and counter the negative affect associated with welfare receipt was well acknowledged throughout the groups:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Jessie: I've noticed a big change too from when I first went on the benefit, I wasn't studying. But now that I'm studying [Work and Income caseworkers are] a bit nicer.  
Yeah.  
Yeah.
- Jessie: So the last time I went in [to Work and Income]//
- Kiri: You're going places.  
Yeah.
- Jessie: // 'it's so wonderful you're studying. Yes, we'll help you out'. 'Cause they could see that I was doing something to try and better my life.

### **Christchurch Group (3)**

- Taylor: I find, see I wouldn't tell people that I was on a benefit.
- Ashleigh: Me neither.
- Taylor: I don't think it's any of their business.
- Ashleigh: When they ask I say student allowance. [Laughs]
- Taylor: Yeah so we study full-time and because I've flipped between the benefit and working for years I only use the benefit if I have to. So I guess like as far as I'm concerned then it's nobody else's business unless you're applying for an HP<sup>38</sup> or something and then it's just like 'no'. [Laughs] You're on limited income and all those new laws and that.
- Ashleigh: Even people though when I tell them I study and they're like, 'Oh how do you afford to live?' I've only just stopped working part-time as well but I would say, 'I have a benefit for it'. And the attitude is, 'Oh why are you on that?' I'm like, 'It's no different than the student loan – that comes from the

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<sup>38</sup> HP is an acronym for *hire purchase* – an arrangement in which a product can be taken home and used while paying it off in regular installments.

government as well, the student allowance'.<sup>39</sup> But you say student allowance, 'Oh that's good. That must be hard to afford on that'. But you say the benefit, 'Oh taking my taxes'.  
Taylor: 'Cause you're seen to be doing something for that money aren't you?

Jessie relates her experiences with Work and Income caseworkers who, she claims, began to treat her differently when she started studying. She is, according to Kiri, "going places"; indeed by her own admission she is "doing something to try and better [her] life". In the second excerpt, Ashleigh and Taylor contend that they often choose to identify themselves to others as students, rather than beneficiaries. The women note that claims of financing studies through Student Allowance encourage support and compassion from others; in contrast the admission of benefit receipt produces disapproval. Even though Ashleigh insists that there is little practical difference between supporting herself through Student Allowance and Sole Parent Support, her assertion "I wouldn't tell people that I was on a benefit" highlights the affective value that studying can afford in social relationships. Like Jessie, Taylor, and Ashleigh, many of the women throughout the groups proposed that claiming a student identity enhanced their relationships with non-beneficiaries and with their Work and Income caseworkers.

### **Mothering**

In writing about her research with working-class women, Skeggs (1997; 2004; 2011) draws attention to the value participants in various projects attempted to generate through the care, loyalty and affection performed in other aspects of their lives. Previous research with lone mothers in New Zealand has similarly highlighted the way that mothers on welfare emphasise the importance of their maternal roles in order to moderate the impact of welfare discourses (Patterson, 2004; Todd, 2008). While the care aspect involved in mothering was present to a small degree in the focus groups I conducted, it was frequently overwhelmed by an emphasis on the

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<sup>39</sup> *Student Allowances* are non-recoverable means-tested weekly payments available to assist tertiary students with living expenses. *Student Loans* are recoverable non-means tested financial assistance for tertiary students.

labour involved in raising children. This finding is not unexpected given the prominence of work in current New Zealand welfare policy, and that of productivity within neoliberal rhetoric. It also aligns with the discussion in Chapters One in which I drew attention to the way that notions of “intensive mothering” have become a dominant influence in the raising of children. The time and effort mothers spend with their children has increasingly come to be seen as an investment in the future of the child: the production of new neoliberal citizens. While international research has indicated that intensive mothering is most often performed by mothers with the economic means of doing so (Perrier, 2013; Reich, 2014; Vincent, 2017; Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2010), many of the women in my focus groups utilised discourses pertaining to this practice:

### **Māori Group (3)**

Frances: I’ve done heaps of courses in brainwave technology and parenting courses and I said to [my friend] ‘children growing up’, (‘cause I’d only just had a baby then and my son was one), I said ‘from before birth to three years old a child needs their parents, needs a solid relationship with one or two if they’re lucky. The last thing you wanna do is be dropping them off to day care’. You know I do understand that parents do need to do that and they choose to do that for reasons that best fit them, but from what I learnt and how I decided to raise my children is the fact that what I teach them myself is best for their future. That’s what I told her, I said ‘I’m not gonna put my kids in care, pay for them to be in care, get up and go to work in a job that I don’t wanna work at with my kids missing out on having a happy mum because I’ll come home tired and the house would be a mess’.

### **Auckland Group (1)**

Rachelle: I could have been out working and putting my kids in day care and stuff like that and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, but I chose to stay home with my kids.

Gina: That should be okay.

Rachelle: That shouldn’t be disrespected because I think a mother that stays home and has input into the next generation; we can’t rely on the system to give our kids values and things like that ‘cause clearly it ain’t working.

Mandy: Somebody has to be paid to look after my kids, I don't see why it can't be me. My kids, they go to school, they go to kindy,<sup>40</sup> they get everything they need, they've got friends. It's just kind of ridiculous that you're pushed to pay childcare, go through all the rigmarole of getting assistance to pay for childcare or kindy or whatever so you can go to work to pay for childcare.

**Rural Group**

Piper: That's the thing, there's no value given to the job you're doing with your own kids I think. I actually really believe I am the best person to raise my children, especially when they're really little. I think I am doing a good job of it and me and their dad went to check out the day care centres and both decided that for them and for what was available to us that it would be better for me to be really poor, it's all right for him, but neither of us were comfortable with what was available.

In New Zealand, like many western countries, parents have a number of responsibilities: a mix of legal, moral and social obligations. Mandy refers to these: her children “go to school, they go to kindy, they get everything they need, they've got friends”. She is fulfilling her basic duties as a parent. Yet as Frances and Piper indicate, mothering practices go beyond this. They have completed courses and carried out research in an endeavour to make informed decisions in the raising of their children. In the first excerpt Frances describes a heated discussion with a friend who told her to “get off your arse and get a job”. Frances takes issue with this comment: she has made a decision to remain out of paid employment in order to raise her children. This is not a random decision, but one that has emerged from her research and the parenting courses she has completed. There is a very strong emphasis on the labour she performs, not only in caring for her children but also in preparing them for their lives ahead.

In these accounts the women explicitly connect child-rearing and work. Piper, whose quote opened this chapter, is doing “a good job”, a job for which she is “the best person”. She knows this because, like Frances, she has done some research, evaluated her options and made a decision that works in the best interests of her

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<sup>40</sup> *Kindy* is an abbreviation of Kindergarten. In New Zealand Kindergartens offer early childhood education for children between the ages of three and five years.

children. Furthermore, she argues, mothering is work. Like staff at Work and Income she is working and, similarly, her work is taxpayer funded. This emphasis on mothering as productive work repeated throughout many of the groups. The women are not lazing around at home; rather they are actively working at raising their children. They have input into their children's lives, teaching them and ensuring that all of their needs are met. The women I interviewed may not have been able to afford a myriad of extra-curricular activities for their children, but their accounts demonstrated that cultural definitions of hands-on mothering have similarly shaped their attitudes towards parenting.

As the women's narratives emphasise, the value accruing to mothering is claimed not only in relation to productivity but also through the labour involved in *choosing* to do it. Neoliberal ideology promotes the notion of autonomous self-governing agents, and the rhetoric of choice is prominent within this. In the performance of neoliberal citizenship, a decision can be overshadowed by the practice of choosing itself. Choosing is a form of active labour: it indicates that options have been evaluated prior to a decision being made. In the literature on gender and mothering engaging in the decision-making process becomes a confirmation of one's commitment to one's children (Lois, 2010; Reich 2014; Wall, 2001). Many of the women's arguments, were structured around what Wilkins (2014, p.247) has referred to as the "affective framework of choosing". Piper highlights that she chose not to enter paid employment. Frances acknowledges that while some parents "choose to [work] for reasons that best fit them", it was not the right decision for her and her children. Rachelle emphasises her belief that there is "nothing wrong" with mothers who enrol their children at day care: it is simply that she has made a different decision. Other parents may "choose" to do what is best for them, but these women have "decided [how] to raise [their] children" based on what is "best for their future". In emphasising the decisions they have made, the women are asserting that they have engaged with the alternatives, and that they are competent to make a choice.

Inherent in many of the focus group accounts, however, was the acknowledgement that, in the context of welfare reform, it is no longer “okay” for women like them to make this choice. While women who are independent of the state can decide to stay out of the workforce to intensively parent their children, recent welfare reforms in this country have reduced the amount of time that mothers reliant on welfare can be full-time parents. Policy that forces mothers to actively search for paid employment, also reduces their autonomy as parents. Many of the mothers related intense pressure from Work and Income to return to work. If neoliberal citizens are positioned as free agents capable of making decisions that are in their own self-interest (Reich, 2014; Wilkins, 2014), then having choice removed negates claims to neoliberal citizenship.

### **Neoliberal citizenship and welfare recipients**

Neoliberalism encourages us to see ourselves as individual active subjects. We are urged to continuously improve ourselves as we strive to develop our social and economic wellbeing. The modern neoliberal citizen is highly productive and works independently, making decisions apposite to their individual situation in order to maintain their own and their dependents’ comfort, security and health. In structuring narratives around the principles of neoliberalism the women appeared to be asserting their “person value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011) in performances designed to separate themselves from the symbolic figure of the welfare mother. In some places in their accounts, the women argued they were successful in these performances. The women who emphasised their participation in higher education, for example, were able to claim that they were meeting the obligations of neoliberal citizenship, not only in terms of future gains in economic productivity, but also as active consumers.

For the most part, however, the women’s accounts highlighted the difficulty of negotiating value in the welfare environment. The negative affective value accruing to them as welfare recipients seemed to overwhelm all other attempts to generate positive value. While the women may have emphasised the work involved in



mothering, accounts of pressure from Work and Income to undertake paid employment dominated the focus group discussions, and so, as Piper notes, it became clear to the women that “there’s no value given to the job you’re doing with your own kids”. As a number of participants pointed out during the focus groups, being in paid employment necessitates somebody else caring for one’s children. The absurdity of this is highlighted by Mandy when she states “somebody has to be paid to look after my kids, I don’t see why it can’t be me”. As Vincent (2010, p.112) has argued, however, in relation to similar welfare policy in the United Kingdom, “such is the deficit view of ‘welfare mothers’ that the implicit assumption of policymakers appears to be that children are better off in childcare while their mother works”.

Participants seemed well aware that welfare reform in New Zealand, and the way it has been implemented, has limited their opportunities to generate value in social relationships. Other mothers may be able to utilise choice in their parenting decisions, but this is denied to those who are reliant on welfare. The women found it challenging to convince others, particularly their Work and Income caseworkers, of their productivity when, as Jessie concedes, “a lot of people automatically assume because you’re on a benefit you’re a bum and doing nothing”. Welfare mothers cannot be considered productive because beneficiaries are “lazy doing nothing [and] should be out there working”. While the women rely on the state for the support, they are cannot be industrious, self-governing, neoliberal citizens: they can only be beneficiaries.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have drawn upon Ahmed’s (2014) metaphor of an affective economy to emphasise the way that affect circulates and flows in relation to welfare. An economic metaphor aligns well with a discussion of welfare receipt in the local context. In New Zealand today notions of economic utility are integral to everyday sense making. Those who cannot demonstrate their capacity to generate economic capital are devalued: productivity (specifically economic productivity) has become integral in the generation of “person value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011). Throughout the

chapter I have used the concept of “person value” to refer to the negotiation of social value within relationships with others. This chapter has highlighted the ways in which participants attempted to maximise their “person value” or affective capital as they discussed their experiences of welfare receipt. Talk of value in both emotional and fiscal terms was evident in these accounts as the women acknowledged the negative affect that accrued to them as welfare recipients, and attempted to reassert their worth through attempts at redefining productivity and emphasising aspects of their identities that did not rely on economic independence. Participants highlighted their capacity and enthusiasm for both work and study; stressed the hard work associated with mothering; and drew attention to their commitment to their children as evidenced by a decision to stay out of full-time paid employment.

Ultimately, however, while the women argued that certain aspects of their personhood had social value their accounts largely emphasised an inability to generate worth as long as they were reliant upon welfare. The discussions highlighted the way that the women’s identities as welfare recipients disrupted the social and cultural resources that they attempted to draw upon in order to generate positive value in the welfare environment. Despite arguing that they *should* be entitled to respect through their demonstrated commitment to previous or future paid employment many of the women acknowledged that in their experience this was not the case. While many of the women utilised a neoliberal rhetoric of choice to frame their desire to stay out of the workforce in order to parent their children, their accounts frequently emphasised their inability to practice choice, consequently invalidating any claims to neoliberal citizenship. The women’s dependence upon welfare appeared to undermine attempts to constitute themselves as “good” mothers or productive citizens. It seems that as long as welfare recipients remain dependent upon welfare, any affective response evoked by other aspects of their identities is likely to be overwhelmed by the negative affect adhering to them as beneficiaries.

## Affect and the making of place

I sat next to a guy ... and I said to him, 'Can I help you because you look really like something's wrong. Are you okay?' ... He said 'Is there bad stuff in these offices, because every time I come in here I get really depressed?' (Lisa, Auckland Focus Group (1))

This chapter examines the way that focus group participants talked about their visits to the offices of Work and Income New Zealand. It focuses on accounts of the organisation's environment, administrative practices, and caseworkers considering how these work together to form an emotional impression of place. Cameron Duff (2010) proposes that places can evoke an affective response. He refers to "thick" places that contribute to a sense of meaning (Duff, 2010, p.882). While Duff (2010) considers such spaces in the more positive sense of personal enrichment, I look at how they can also generate the "bad stuff" that makes the man in Lisa's story feel "depressed". In this chapter I draw together accounts of this "bad stuff" and consider how this creates an emotional atmosphere within Work and Income offices.

Geographers Ben Anderson (2009) and Nigel Thrift (2004, p.68) have described the way that affective responses can be "designed into spaces". Thrift (2004, p.68) considers aspects such as design, lighting, and music but he also notes other features such as event management and performance as forms of "landscape engineering". Anderson (2009, p.77) describes affective atmospheres as giving specific meaning to spaces. Atmosphere, he proposes, is felt collectively, but it is also intensely personal: an atmosphere belongs to the emanating space and to the feeling subject. I use Anderson's (2009; 2014) concept of affective atmospheres to frame this chapter paying attention to the intensity that gives Work and Income offices a particular feeling for those that use them.

This chapter focuses on participants' accounts of everyday encounters at Work and Income offices. Client interaction with Work and Income as an organisation is not of course limited to visits to the offices. Information is available online and via a call centre. Some grants can be applied for online or over the phone. In the focus group discussions, however, participants returned time and time again to their meetings at Work and Income. For this reason, in this chapter, I focus on the ways in which they made sense of these visits, and the meanings they attributed to the physical environment that formed the backdrop to these meetings. I argue that the environment at Work and Income is not inherently uncomfortable, but is rendered so by common organisational practices. The chapter begins by considering how participants talked about the physical spaces of the offices; it then analyses accounts of administrative processes; before moving to consider the way that participants described the staff at Work and Income. My analysis draws attention to the practices of the organisation, or what Mills (2003) has referred to as the "mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested", in considering the various ways that the atmosphere at Work and Income is produced, and how this shaped beneficiaries experiences within the offices.

### **The Work and Income atmosphere**

Cameron Duff (2010, p.881 *italics in original*) writes that "to experience place is to be *affected by place*". He proposes that place is always more than a simple geographical representation, rather places evoke feelings. It was clear from discussions in the focus groups that Work and Income offices stirred up many emotions for the women. Participants described their visits to Work and Income in very negative terms. They repeatedly spoke of trying to avoid going into offices, and of wanting to leave as quickly as they could. Women related feeling "fear" and "dread" in relation to their appointments. They used words such as "horrible", "hideous", "traumatic" and "downgrading" to describe these visits.

Negative descriptions of the Work and Income environment ran throughout the focus groups:

### Christchurch Group (1)

- Claire: You mentioned the offices. So can you say some more about that?
- Christie: They're quite clinical aren't they?
- Vesna: Yeah. It doesn't seem inviting. It always seems really hot to me in there. I don't know, maybe they're trying to make us hot so it will make us leave faster, I don't know [Laughter].
- Christie: You can't leave until they're finished [Laughs].
- Vesna: There's this desk here with the line that goes here and pretty much out the door so it looks really bad before you even step in the door and then these people can stand there and tell them their whole life story and it's just to say 'hey I've got an appointment at 1.30'. But it's like why isn't there two or three people on the desk? There's a whole lot of ... people at the empty desks where there's no work going on and you're just waiting and waiting and waiting. Then I've seen lots of people just turn around and walk out again but I don't want to do that because I don't have time to come back and stand in that line again. Then it is so plain, there's no pictures on the walls, you've got this little tiny corner to sit with all these other people and some are like I don't wanna be near them. I could be like one of those people and they don't wanna be near me but I do find it very unattractive, uninviting and makes me feel like I've just walked into a shithole where I'm gonna be treated like shit.

Christie describes the offices themselves as “clinical”, a word that indicates that the environment is austere and lacks feeling. Vesna similarly describes the spaces as “plain”. There is little decoration and it does not feel “inviting”. Vesna also complains of feeling too “hot” during all of her visits to the offices. Her negative feelings for the place are articulated here in terms of bodily discomfort. Despite claims by both Vesna and Christie that the offices are void of emotion, there seems to be much in the offices that encourage the women to feel a particular way. The small waiting area; the “waiting and waiting and waiting”; and the proximity of others who they do not “wanna be near” all contribute to this negative feeling. Vesna sums it up as feeling “like I've just walked into a shithole where I'm gonna be treated like shit”. The contrast between Vesna's description of the offices as both “plain” and a

“shithole” could not be more distinct. It seems that irrespective of how the offices actually look, Work and Income spaces manifest ill feeling.

Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot and Tankel (2014, p.2043) have described Work and Incomes offices as “emotionally charged negative space[s]”. While the women pointed out that the offices themselves were usually modern and clean, they also repeatedly stressed how much they disliked visiting them. When asked to elaborate many commented on the consistently long wait times, and a lack of available facilities to ease this waiting:

#### **Christchurch Group (6)**

Jayne: There’s no toilet, no toilet facilities,<sup>41</sup> there’s not even water, not any water. You try and sit there for two hours really pregnant with nowhere to go and then they tell you if you go over the road there’s some public toilets out there. There’s no way you’re gonna go there ‘cause you’re scared that you’re gonna lose your place and being a pregnant woman the facilities are just not there and I found it frustrating, like you feel like you’re at the bottom of the pool.

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

Stephanie: And if you need to use the toilet, you’ve got to get a key. You go with the guard and he unlocks the toilet. Like, what are you gonna do?

Sydney: Do you?

Stephanie: Yeah. I’ve been to the toilet once when my son needed to go, it was following the guard up this lift and then he opened the toilet with a key and then waited outside for us and locked it and then went back down. To use a toilet.

Sydney: I wonder what they think you’re gonna do?

Stephanie: It was pretty ridiculous. And most waiting rooms have a water thing or, you know, especially when you’re waiting that long, or magazines. It’s just not a normal waiting room.

The way these participants spoke about the environment at Work and Income reflects a way of thinking about social spaces. Many of the women made

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<sup>41</sup> Access to toilet facilities varied in accounts. Participants reported that some Work and Income offices do not have toilets available for client use. Other offices do provide access but clients need to be accompanied by a security guard who will unlock the door and relock it after use.

comparisons with other public waiting rooms in order to emphasise the disparities between Work and Income offices and social practice in wider New Zealand society. There are certain norms of waiting in this country: the organisation will take steps to increase the comfort of those they cannot see immediately. It will provide water, magazines and access to toilet facilities. These are things that according to Stephanie happen in a “normal waiting room”. Goodsell (1984) notes that certain items in waiting rooms symbolise to an organisation’s clients that their wellbeing is of concern. Comparisons with doctors’ waiting rooms were made in many of the focus groups to emphasise the difference in the amenities available in areas where participants had also experienced long waits. Implicit in these comparisons is that the wellbeing and comfort of Work and Income clients is not a concern, and this contributed to the women’s dislike of the spaces. If, as Jayne points out, the facilities are not there, then “you feel like you’re at the bottom of the pool”.

### **Waiting and waiting and waiting**

In the accounts above, participants mention long wait times in offices. Vesna refers to a line of people outside the office and experiences of “just waiting and waiting and waiting”. Jayne talks about waiting “for two hours really pregnant”. Complaints about long waits were repeated throughout the groups. Waiting is not simply an inconvenience. Research has emphasised the humiliation of being kept waiting (Comfort, 2008) and the correlation of social position and waiting (Schwartz, 1974; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). Those who are kept waiting begin to feel insignificant: “to be kept waiting – especially to be kept waiting for an unusually long while – is to be the subject of an assertion that one’s own time (and therefore one’s social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait” (Schwartz, 1974, p.30). This sentiment was echoed throughout the focus groups:

### **Wellington Group**

Kirsten: You walk in and it doesn’t matter how many people are in the waiting bit, it could be two, it could be 20 and you see the staff and they’re facing you. They sit in front of their computers with no one in front of them and you’re scheduled, you’re booked in, you’ve organised yourself and organised your child. You’re there a couple of minutes in advance and you wait and

- you wait and you wait while they're sitting there with no one in front of them and more people come and you wait and you wait and then they kind of get up, walk over, they won't look at anyone in the eye, and then they do a quick look up, call whoever it is. You just think 'that's so insulting'.
- Amy: And it's like despite the fact they expect you to work and your time should be worth something, your time's not worth anything once you enter there and they never say sorry. I've never had anyone go 'thanks for waiting' or 'sorry for waiting' or anything like that, never.
- April: There's no compassion if you're late, like I turned up for an appointment once five minutes late because I had something happen that was out of my control and she said 'no, I'm sorry, we can't put you through, you'll have to rebook'. I said 'I have to see you about this now; this is urgent'. She said 'no, well sorry', like no mercy some of them.
- Holly: I've had that so many times.
- Amy: It's okay for them to make you wait, but not vice versa.

Long waits caused physical discomfort but, perhaps more painfully, these waits emphasised to the women their low standing within the Work and Income hierarchy. Kirsten describes being able to see staff sitting at desks without clients in front of them. She is affronted by the lack of acknowledgment of her efforts to arrive on time, and by staff who "won't look anyone in the eye", an implication of a lack of respect. Participants throughout the groups reported waiting at Work and Income for long periods of time seeing staff sitting at empty desks, taking breaks or having collegial chats with co-workers. They reported feeling ignored by staff, of watching but not being looked at it return. These "looking relations" have been described by bell hooks (1997, p.168) writing in the context of racism as the denial of an individual's subjectivity. She describes the subsequent invisibility of those who watch as dehumanising and oppressive. This is in Kirsten's words "insulting". That participants felt "compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility" (hooks, 1997, p.168) was evident from many accounts of time spent in waiting rooms. In their descriptions participants highlighted having to quietly sit, wait, and watch helplessly as caseworkers prioritised their place in the working schedule.



Schwartz (1974) and more recently Auyero (2010; 2011) have emphasised that the social stratification in waiting rooms is generally interpreted in relation to power. Auyero (2010) writes that:

In the recursive interactions with the state, poor people learn that they have to remain temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed ... this implicit knowledge demonstrates that acts of cognition are, simultaneously, acts of recognition of the established political order. (p.857)

Many participants expressed the view that they were deliberately made to wait. Constituting their excessive waiting as part of a deliberate strategy that Kirsten argued was intended to “put you in your place” emphasised the women’s feelings of powerlessness in their interactions with Work and Income. As Amy points out, upon entering the office “your time’s not worth anything”. Indeed, as April relates, despite the inevitability of long wait times, tardiness by a beneficiary can have serious repercussions. Beneficiaries must be on time or risk losing their appointment. Once there, however, they must wait and wait. As Amy notes, waiting comes without an apology and so the longer they wait the clearer the women’s place “at the bottom of the pool” becomes.

### **Hypervisibility and the authoritarian gaze**

While participants’ descriptions of waiting emphasised feelings of invisibility in the Work and Income waiting rooms, many also noted that they felt too visible during their visits:

#### **Christchurch Group (2)**

Ana: The [Work and Income] office I went to just looked sort of tidy and formal enough. Completely open plan. Well, most of it was open plan. So on one hand I mentioned that they might do that for security reasons but there’s absolutely no privacy in going to the desk and saying anything about what you might be there for, or I’m just conscious of how loud I’m talking when I was in an appointment. And I don’t know if that could be made any better by a partition or anything like that. It

- wasn't that bad but I just was aware that it was very open and that I did feel like I was discussing I guess the personal stuff of how my life worked. ...
- Ellie: I definitely find the same thing. There's a nice big open plan space but, once again, once you're there and you're getting asked questions, you do kind of go I don't want everyone to hear what's going on 'cause it's quite personal; especially when it comes to money, it's like, oh gosh.
- Tania: Yeah, I don't want the teenager over there to hear me.
- Ellie: Yeah, I don't mind telling you but it's hard not to hear other people's bits and pieces too. It's like you can definitely hear me.
- Tania: I agree with you about the partition thing. I actually feel like you're in there talking to someone about for me money is a personal thing, but talking to someone about that and how you need something but the person over there can hear you. 'Cause you can hear them; they can hear you. And even if there was a partition, I don't care if they can hear me but they can't see me so that's fine.

Complaints about a lack of privacy at Work and Income have been a recurring feature of New Zealand research with welfare recipients (Hodgetts et al., 2014; Morton et al. 2014). Similarly participants in my research described the embarrassment of discussing personal information in an open plan office. In the excerpt above, Ana mentions that, while she understands the need for open plan offices, the requirement to discuss “personal stuff” in an environment where people can overhear makes her feel uncomfortable. Ellie and Tania agree, they “don't want everyone to hear what's going on”.

While Ana, Ellie, and Tania emphasise their discomfort at having meetings overheard, it seems from their comments that this could be ameliorated by not being seen. The women raise the possibility of having partitions in the offices to block them from view. In other focus groups, participants talked about not wanting others to witness them going into Work and Income offices. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is much negative affect circulating and attaching itself to the figure of the welfare mother. Being able to be clearly identified as a welfare recipient and observed moving through the process of collecting welfare entitlements makes this affect impossible to avoid.

Ahmed (2014) suggests that being witnessed in a socially shaming circumstance increases the negative feelings associated with that situation:

To be witnessed in one's failure is to be ashamed: to have one's shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame. (p.103)

As I have previously noted – and will discuss in more detail in Chapter Six – there is shame associated with welfare receipt in New Zealand. This feeling appeared to be strengthened by being in a situation in which one could be clearly identified as a beneficiary. Ahmed (2014, p.104) proposes that feeling shame is often followed by the impulse “to cover oneself”: to hide from view. This explanation fits with Ana and Tania's enthusiasm for partitions at Work and Income. It also offers a reason as to why the women who took part in the groups were less critical of the Work and Income call centres that they also frequently utilised. While the women often complained of long waits times and of receiving incorrect information over the phone, their stories were far less affectively charged than accounts of visits to Work and Income offices. Talking to staff on the phone, generally in their own homes, was a less conspicuous option than entering the Work and Income environment. In your own home it is possible to remain hidden from the view of others.

Concerns about visibility were not only about a desire to avoid being seen in a shameful situation. Many of the women also expressed anxiety in relation to the way they were observed by staff at Work and Income. That the women felt constrained by the gaze of those working at Work and Income was evident throughout the accounts:

#### **Auckland Group (2)**

Mandy: But the pressure is on you to behave and that's what I hate about going into WINZ offices. I don't go in often either because the less you go in, the more they leave you alone. That's what I've found. But when I'm in there you look around and people are like this with their caseworkers trying to be cheerful. It's really scary; they are so petrified of being told

- that they're not behaving well or whatever it is. Everyone who is sitting there is//
- Rachelle: Yeah that's really true
- Penny: Yeah 'cause it's like they incorporate WINZ and CYFS<sup>42</sup> and all that, they seem a bit interlinked. I don't know, sometimes it's what I feel. It's like you have to hold your breath sometimes that you're gonna get your grant.
- Mandy: Yeah behave yourself or you're gonna get stuff taken off you.

### **Christchurch Group (5)**

- Sam: I used to take my oldest [child] in, no toys, nothing for them to do. And the receptionist was a horrible old biddy. She used to always, she would yell at my child. She put her hands on him a few times and I went nuts. She said always, even if he was up and I was singing to him and he was like just jumping around in front of me and she always said, 'sit him down on his bum. Make sure he stays there because people are gonna fall over him or he's disrupting people'. She was so at me about [him], and she was very vindictive, she was always, yeah, because I'd always tell her not to put her hands on my child. So she'd put me at the bottom of the list and then forget about me. And I'd go up hours later, after everybody that had come in after me had been seen and I was like, 'Hello?' She was like, 'Oh, sorry. Your name's down here, we forgot to put it up'.

In the first account Mandy discusses feeling compelled to act in a certain way during her visits to Work and Income offices, a feeling similarly acknowledged by the other participants. This obligation to behave, repeated throughout the focus groups, is consistent with the Foucauldian notion of governmentality in relation to the governing of oneself. Those who are constantly being observed, Foucault (1991) proposed, will modify their behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore as Mandy points out there is the implicit threat that if beneficiaries do not behave well they will lose out on entitlements. Penny then shifts the conversation to that of information monitoring. Her concern is the connection between Work and Income and Child Youth and

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<sup>42</sup> CYFS is an acronym for Child, Youth and Family a government agency that, prior to 2017, had the responsibility for supporting children at risk of harm. Previously Work and Income and Child Youth and Family were part of the Ministry of Social Development. On 1 April 2017 a new stand-alone ministry, the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki was implemented to replace Child, Youth and Family.

<sup>43</sup> Participants often spoke about modifying their behaviour and masking their feelings during their meetings with Work and Income, and this is discussed more fully in Chapter Six.

Family (at the time of the interviews both under the management of the Ministry of Social Development) and that her relationship with one part of the organisation could impact on her association with the other. The second excerpt emphasises the immediate repercussions when Work and Income clients do not meet the organisation's behavioural requirements. Sam describes taking her son to appointments and being castigated by the receptionist for not keeping him quiet. She relates that on occasions when she resisted the staff member's attempts to discipline her son, Sam would find herself "at the bottom of the list" and subjected to a lengthy wait.

As Sam emphasises, wait times in the offices can be particularly difficult for mothers of young children. Beneficiaries with young children have a choice: they can either arrange for childcare or take children into the offices with them. While there was the acknowledgement that meetings ran more smoothly without children present, many participants related being unable to find sitters or feeling reluctant to pay for childcare to attend a meeting to request money. Bringing children with them, however, could be problematic as the majority of offices do not provide toys for the children. Participants spoke of the difficulties of keeping children entertained during long waits in spaces with no toys, and in which food is prohibited. They also told stories, like Sam, of having children reprimanded by staff for misbehaving. Many of the women were well aware that inherent in welfare discourses is the supposition that "we don't actually look after our children", and their inability to counter the public denunciation of their parenting skills by Work and Income staff (for fear of jeopardising their appointments) further reinforced the oppressive atmosphere of the offices.

Foucault (1977) wrote extensively about visibility and surveillance discussing the ways that bodies are managed and disciplined by their environment. He utilised the example of Jeremy Bentham's, much cited, "panopticon" to illustrate the effectiveness of an authoritative gaze in controlling behaviour. The gaze was reconceptualised by Foucault (1977) to describe a surveillance technique effective not only in the prison system (as Bentham envisaged), but also in institutions

throughout society. In many of the focus group conversations the women spoke of feeling constrained by the gaze of staff at Work and Income. Many participants, like Mandy, Penny, and Rachelle described modifying their behaviour during office visits for fear of losing out on entitlements. Participants like Sam, who objected to this requirement, spoke of quickly realising that they were being constantly observed, and that there were consequences for not conforming.

The authoritative gaze, as Penny implies in the account above, is not simply about being physically seen. This term also refers to surveillance of one's personal information. The women I interviewed spoke at length of the obligation to provide detailed and private information during their visits to Work and Income. One of the requirements of receiving welfare in New Zealand, as in other neoliberal societies, is the relinquishment of privacy norms that many other citizens enjoy (Gilliom, 2001; Ocen, 2012). Requests for information pertaining to living arrangements, levels of personal spending, relationship breakdowns, or the whereabouts of former partners were all identified throughout the focus groups as invasions of privacy. The more intrusive the questioning the higher the degree of discomfort the women reported feeling. For women who were new to the benefit system, such requests were particularly unsettling.

Gilliom (2001) argues that surveillance has always been embedded in means-tested welfare systems, yet recent technology has increased the reach of the state into poor women's lives. Women on welfare must submit to this interrogation by the state in order to provide for themselves and their families. There is humiliation in having to relinquish this right, particularly in a public space. Yet as well as shame, participants expressed both resentment and suspicion at what they perceived to be unnecessary intrusions by caseworkers into their private lives:

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

Brooke: I remember the questions [when I first applied for a benefit] were quite personal, 'cause I was with my daughter's dad for about a year until we broke up. And yeah, it was quite personal going in and some of the questions that they ask,

- yeah, it was quite upsetting in a way, 'cause you've gone through a bit of a trauma in a way and then you're sort of bombarded with all these questions; and it's embarrassing 'cause of the stigma that comes with going onto a benefit.
- Stephanie: I had a protection order against my son's father and they still asked a lot of questions even though it's so severe; and there wasn't much sympathy or anything. So their questioning was quite invasive and really personal and they didn't seem very sympathetic.
- Claire: So the questioning, questions of?
- Stephanie: Just of the circumstances, like why you're wanting to apply for this and why it didn't work out and, you know? Way too personal. Especially when you're going through a traumatic time, it's not ideal.

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Jessie: Yeah. I've had the same kind of experience I left a bad relationship when I first went back on the DPB solo parent and they were asking me questions about the relationship, what kind of violence it was and what happened and this. It's none of their business.
- Caitlin: Well, they're not social workers eh, they're just//
- Jessie: Exactly.
- Caitlin: They don't care.
- Yeah.
- Jessie: They just do it to just be nosey just 'cause they can.
- Caitlin: You get certain ones that do.
- Jessie: They feel like they have a certain power I think
- Hine: So often they will try and use it against you eh?
- Caitlin: Yeah.
- Hine: That's what I felt. They want your background so that they can use it against you.

In the first excerpt Brooke describes intrusive questions from her caseworker that she found “upsetting” and “embarrassing”. Stephanie also takes issue with “invasive” requests for information that she found “way too personal”. There is a sense of anger in this narrative, directed at caseworkers who are insensitive to the needs of their clients and unsympathetic to their individual situations. Resentment also marks the second account. Jessie begins by asserting that personal information is “none of their [caseworkers] business”. She is suspicious of what caseworkers will do with information about the violence in her past relationship. Hine echoes Jessie's

concerns: staff ask for background information in order to “use it against you”. Past experience with Work and Income caseworkers has convinced the women that they are not operating within a context of concern – case managers “don’t care” – and therefore the information must be being requested for some other purpose. Jessie proposes that requests for personal information are made merely to reinforce the imbalance of power between beneficiaries and caseworkers. Hine develops this idea arguing that personal information is gathered and interpreted by caseworkers in ways that can impact on eligibility for benefits.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduces the concept of “descending individualism”. He proposes that the wealthy and powerful in modern society are able to avoid “the gaze” – a high level of state surveillance – and subsequently keep their personal information private. In New Zealand much of the information requested by Work and Income would normally only be voluntarily shared with close friends or family. Participants’ discomfort with the requirement to share information with Work and Income highlights their desire to avoid the authoritative gaze that renders beneficiaries highly visible within the state system. It was clear from the women’s comments that, like those women who took part in Gilliom’s (2001, p.113) research, participants found “ongoing record keeping, observation, and verification manifest[ed] a considerable and fearsome presence in their lives”. For women on benefits a violation of privacy norms is an everyday reality. As Munger (2003) explains, however, this is not simply a matter of losing some abstract right of privacy. There is humiliation in this loss. This is combined with the frustration of having to consolidate an assortment of documentation, and the fear that information will be used in a way that could potentially hinder access to entitlements – or worse. All of these emotions consolidate within Work and Income offices, spaces described as best avoided by many of the participants because “the less you go in, the more they leave you alone”.



### **Administrative practices**

The atmosphere of an environment is intrinsically connected to what happens there. Practices of a place “embed” affect into it (Duff, 2010, p.892). Focus group participants were very critical of the administrative practices of Work and Income. In, often lengthy, narratives they described repetitive administrative errors depicting an organisation that was cumbersome and inefficient. The women spoke of Work and Income as “wasting people’s time” through ongoing communication errors that, to many, not only reflected a lack of respect but also were construed as a deliberate attempt to deny beneficiaries access to their entitlements. Participants repeatedly spoke of encountering policy that they could not comprehend, and staff who were unwilling or unable to explain it.

These practices were very apparent in the focus group discussions concerning Special Needs Grants.<sup>44</sup> Accounts of applying for these grants dominated many of the focus groups. Special Needs Grants are non-recoverable emergency payments and may be approved if someone has urgent costs and does not have the financial means to meet these. They are supplementary grants that all of the women were able to apply for in addition to their main benefit. Often the women interviewed had applied for them for food, and they were colloquially referred to as “food grants”. According to the Work and Income website and the Work and Income Process Manuals there are very clear guidelines around the provision of Special Needs Grants (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.c; Work and Income, n.d.b). An applicant must demonstrate (usually through presenting receipts) that money budgeted to meet essential household expenditure was used instead to pay for an unexpected expense. From 15 July 2013 recipients of Sole Parent Support were entitled to one or more Special Needs Grants during a 26-week period amounting to:

- a) \$450 for a sole parent with 1 or 2 dependent children
- b) \$550 for a sole parent with 3 or more dependent children.

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<sup>44</sup> The women in the focus groups were highly critical of many of the administrative practices of Work and Income. I chose to focus specifically on accounts of applications for Special Needs Grants as an example of a practice that was consistently criticised throughout the groups.

While this process appears straightforward, few of the women who took part in the research seemed to understand it. Many talked about being unaware of their entitlements, and spoke of finding it difficult to gain information from staff about the grants application process:

### **Wellington Group**

- Claire: What about food grants, do you know how many of those you're able to get?
- Amy: No.
- Hannah: I think it's three.
- April: Is it? Three a year?
- Hannah: Or six.
- Holly: It's a set amount of money you're allowed, every 52 weeks.
- April: It's too traumatic for me to go in there and ask for a free food grant, it's so traumatic.
- Holly: They like tell you when you're in need of food, like you can't go in there and say you need a food grant.
- Helen: Yeah you have to like prove that you've had a big expense like a car bill or a big power bill or something.

### **Auckland Group (2)**

- Josie: Because they go with that food grant, oh you've got \$600 and you can use that every year or whatever it is or you can come three times. But you come the first time, 'oh we need a budget'. So you get the budget and you go back. 'Oh no no you can have \$100' even though you know you've got \$400 left, so they won't give you the \$600.
- Claire: Did you all know that you could get that money every year, the amount of the food grant?
- Rachelle: Every six months.
- Gina: It's about \$1,000 isn't it?
- Mandy: Six no they've cut it down
- Penny: No 700 per year
- Gina: But when my budgeter rang up they said I had \$1,000 worth of food grant entitlements.

New Zealand research has consistently highlighted that beneficiaries do not feel well informed about their entitlements (Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010; Morton et al., 2014; Waldegrave et al., 2011). Confusion surrounding Special Needs Grants, as exemplified in these excerpts, was strongly evident in all of the groups.

There was a significant disparity in the information that the women claimed to have received in relation to their entitlements. Despite clear departmental guidelines – as is very apparent from these two excerpts – participants often appeared to be unaware of the amount of these grants, or the circumstances under which they could receive them.

Versions of these two accounts repeated throughout the groups. While some women were aware of the necessity of proving they had encountered an unforeseen expense “like a car bill or a big power bill” in order to get assistance, for the most part the women seemed unaware of how much additional assistance they were entitled to and how they should go about accessing this. In their accounts they described the reactions of case managers to these applications, and the amounts they would receive, as both arbitrary and incontestable. The women often seemed to feel that nothing they did would significantly impact the outcome of their applications. As Holly explained “they like tell you when you’re in need of food, like you can’t go in there and say you need a food grant”.

There were very strong affective formations in the women’s accounts of applying for a Special Needs Grant. There was the confusion outlined above, but accounts of applying to Work and Income for grants were also framed by shame induced as the women applied for assistance in a public environment.<sup>45</sup> In April’s account she refers to the process of going in and asking for a “free food grant” as “traumatic”. Her use of the word “free” implies that this grant is not perceived to be an entitlement but rather a charitable handout. In other focus groups women spoke of having to “beg” caseworkers, for Special Need Grants, of feeling “belittled” by those administering the process, or of being too “scared” to apply for the grant because of previous experiences with the application process.

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<sup>45</sup> Not all applications for Special Needs Grants need to be made in person. According to the Ministry of Social Development website, clients may be able to apply for payments over the phone if they are applying “once or twice a year and have a Payment Card” (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.c). Many of the women spoke of the ease of (and their preference for) such applications.

As the women told their stories of this process many, like Josie in the account above, became angry describing the hurdles to be overcome in order to access entitlements:

### **Māori Group (3)**

Frances: Like when I first started they'd go 'yep your appointment's here', they go 'bring your ID'. So you bring your ID to the appointment and you get to the reception and they go, 'have you got all of the forms that you need?' I'm like, 'What forms?' They're like, 'bank statements'. So you go and get the bank statement, then you get into your appointment after waiting and then they say, 'what did you spend your money on?' You say, 'this and that'. They go, 'where's your receipts?' You go, 'what? What do you mean?' Then they go, 'we can't give you anything unless you have proof so we're going to have to make another appointment'. Then most people will give up in between and it's a sort of formula that they do to knock down the money that they let out. It's not fair because you spend, especially if you don't have a car and you have kids that you don't have care for, you're sending this mum out to bus around to get this from the doctor and then go get that from the bank and then go get those receipts from here or that quote from there. One time I had to ring up the power company and get them to send me out a yearly survey or something and it took three weeks and then I had to make an appointment after three weeks and then I just gave up. It was just a big fat waste of time and that's what happens all the time.

### **Christchurch Group (6)**

Jayne: I needed some assistance with food so they said I had to go to budgeting before I could ask for food.

Julie: That's right, you've got to tick the wee checklist don't you?

Jayne: Yes, so I go and see this person at budgeting and it [the budget] says I owe so much a week if I actually followed the budget, if I actually worked with the budget. Like I allowed that much for my warrant, that much for my rego, phone coming out, maybe a medical coming up, food, power. It doesn't add up to how much you're getting a week, like hair and they even put gifts down on this budget and the budget advisor, I don't know if it's probably the same in every scenario in New Zealand. The budget advisor goes 'it's just bullshit but just sign here and then go back with it' and that's what I was told.

These accounts are constructed in a similar way. The women begin by describing an administrative procedure in relation to the Special Needs Grant that must be strictly adhered to so that they can receive assistance. This was the need to produce certain documents that Frances refers to, or the requirement to attend budgeting advice as outlined by Jayne. The regulations in relation to this procedure were only partially understood. In the first example, Frances talks about being told to bring in identification, but arrives to find out she also needs bank statements and receipts to verify her expenditure. Frances constructs her story to draw attention to the delays inherent in these administrative demands and the impact on those applying who have urgent needs. These practices are “not fair” as “most people will give up” before they get the assistance they need. Jayne relates filling in a budget that makes no sense in practical terms as the amount of her benefit does not cover all of the outgoing expenses. In her narrative she similarly emphasises that regulations are in place to hinder her quest for assistance. Both women conclude that processes surrounding the grants are “bullshit” and a “big fat waste of time”.

The two accounts, like the examples above, demonstrate a similar affective patterning. Affect initially experienced as shame or uncertainty shifts to anger as the women recount their experiences. Wetherell (2012) proposes that affective practice is often made up of a number of different episodes. The shift from shame to anger is an example of “multimodality”, a term she uses to describe assemblages of different affective activity.<sup>46, 47</sup> Frances’ account came just moments after she spoke of the humiliation of entering Work and Income to apply for additional assistance. The shame that began her narrative is moderated here by irritation and anger directed at those who follow an administrative “formula” designed to minimise assistance to those in need. Throughout her account Frances becomes increasingly annoyed as she describes staff members at Work and Income who do not inform beneficiaries of

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<sup>46</sup> This metamorphosis from shame to anger is a significant part of the analysis and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

<sup>47</sup> Wetherell (2012) also uses the term “multimodality” to incorporate the role that different people, animals, objects or spaces, play in affective practice. I use the term in this way later in the chapter. The term multimodality emphasises that affective practice is an integrated activity (Wetherell, 2012).

the correct documentation required to support grant applications, resulting in significant demands being made on the time and energy of vulnerable women. Jayne similarly becomes angry as she describes a grants process that places demands on her time and energy without providing any material benefit. The budgeting appointment is interpreted as existing to meet an organisational requirement rather than offering tangible assistance.

These two examples, like many of the focus group narratives involving anger, are lengthy. As I outline in the following chapter, anger narratives in the focus groups were often detailed as the women went to some lengths to justify their feelings as reasonable to the other participants. Furthermore, the anger in these stories does not simply appear to be a response to the situation described, but also to what the example represents in the context of welfare provision in New Zealand. At the end of both accounts, the women express frustration at a system that denies entitlements to those in need, as they argue that such practices are systematic and widespread. Special Needs Grants are forms of assistance ostensibly designed to help those in need. Yet descriptions of the application process throughout the focus groups emphasised an administration system shaped by welfare discourses concerning the undeserving poor, and assumptions about the reckless spending of welfare recipients. It seems the women's association with the symbolic figure of the welfare mother influences their ability to negotiate their entitlements with Work and Income, and further embeds negative affect into the environment.

### **Work and Income caseworkers: The embodiment of place**

Multimodality not only refers to different affective episodes that form affective practice, but also emphasises that such episodes are often co-created by different participants in an interaction (Wetherell, 2012). As is evident from the examples above, caseworkers played an integral part in the affectively charged interactions that many participants reported experiencing in the offices. Throughout this thesis I refer often to Ahmed's (2014) conceptualisation of bodies becoming saturated and "sticky" with affect. This notion of affect as attaching to certain figures describes the

negative feeling that flows and adheres to mothers on welfare, but it also usefully depicts the way that participants appeared to feel about Work and Income staff. Descriptions of caseworkers as representing all that was negative about the Work and Income environment recurred throughout the focus groups:

**Wellington Group**

Amy: It was hideous. It was really hideous. You're at a really low point in your life often and I think and the people that are there are not sympathetic or pleasant or helpful.

**Māori Group (1)**

Caitlin: It's really sad 'cause it's not just WINZ in Christchurch, it's WINZ everywhere, 'cause I've been to WINZ in Wellington and Gisborne and they're just all the same. They just treat you bad. They just actually treat you bad.

**Pacific Group (2)**

Lei: I don't like people at Work and Income. Serious, honest I don't like people at Work and Income. I don't like them ... they're not like respect[ing] us, how they talk. No I don't like them.

Participants repeatedly gave accounts of being disparaged and demeaned in their encounters with Work and Income staff. Caseworkers were disagreeable, lacked compassion, and frequently did not advise clients of supplementary grants that they were entitled to. Staff members at Work and Income were often positioned as hindering rather than facilitating access to entitlements. Participants' accounts of Work and Income staff constituted them in a particular way and served a very important purpose in the narratives. The women positioned caseworkers, not only as unpleasant to deal with, but also as directly accountable for the difficulties many of them faced in day-to-day interactions at Work and Income.

Ahmed (2014) writes that when we experience painful circumstances we often seek to blame others for our pain. This may entail more than the apportioning of responsibility: it can also involve the creation of affective figures. In Ahmed's (2014) words:

the 'it hurts' becomes, 'you hurt me', which might become, 'you are hurtful', or even 'you are bad'. These affective responses are readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in the very act of apparent separation (p.28)

The hurt that many of the participants experienced in Work and Income offices established clear boundaries between clients and staff. Caseworkers did not only "treat you bad" but they *were* bad. This assessment of the caseworker character was emphasised in a number of ways. Often the women talked about being spoken to disrespectfully, of not being informed of their entitlements, and of being given incorrect information. Many of the women in the focus groups emphasised the amount of discretion that caseworkers had in their decision-making. The concept of discretion highlighted the element of choice available to caseworkers. Caseworkers had the capacity to offer help, but many elected not to do so. The women gave many examples of having requests for assistance declined and often specifically blamed the staff member who made the decision. Indeed examples of caseworkers refusing or threatening to refuse applications for Special Needs Grants dominated the focus group accounts:

#### **Auckland Group (2)**

Gina: Then you get the ones that are acting like its money from their pocket. Like they're pulling out their wallet to give you the money and I was like 'this isn't coming from your pocket, I worked, these are my taxes too'. She was like, 'Do you want your food grant?' I was like, 'Are you threatening me because I can ask for another case manager, I don't need to have you. I know my rights; I'm not stupid. Don't talk to me like I am.'

#### **Auckland Group (1)**

Jackie: I'd left the freezer door open and ... by the time I got back I'd pretty much lost all the food in my freezer. ... I went in [to Work and Income] ... I said, 'a lot of it is meat and stuff, probably at least maybe \$200'. [The caseworker] was like, 'Oh well we don't really do food grants for that much'. ...I said 'you can see on my thing that I've never once asked for a food grant'. ... I said 'I need to replace that food in the freezer. That's my back up and apart from that it's food for the week as well'. Oh my God it was just like what did she want me to



do? Sit down and kiss her toes? I was just like ‘we’ve got no food bar from the little bit that’s in the pantry that was our main food’. ... I’d shown her a picture; you could tell that the stuff was defrosted. ... She did do [the grant] and then when she gave me this [payment] card ... she said I had to start doing a budgeting course.

In these accounts the women relate applying for Special Needs Grants. Both narratives are framed by the inherent power imbalance of transactions in which caseworkers have the authority to determine if participants will be able to meet their daily needs. While Gina emphasises that welfare is funded through taxpayer contribution, and that she has “rights”, there is still a strong sense that she must convince her caseworker to approve a grant, rather than follow a specific procedure. Jackie’s exasperated comment “what did she want me to do? Sit down and kiss her toes?” similarly emphasises the power she feels her caseworker wields and the arbitrary nature of the decision-making process. Indeed despite being told that “we don’t really do food grants for that much”, after a period of negotiation Jackie reports she was able to obtain the \$200 payment originally requested. Throughout the accounts it became apparent that, despite the administrative procedures guiding the decision-making process, the women believed they needed to prove to individual caseworkers that they were deserving of assistance in order to receive a grant.

In the excerpt above Gina refers to caseworkers “acting like its money from their pocket”. This wording was repeated many times within the focus groups. Women throughout the groups used the phrase to emphasise the difficulty of convincing case managers that they needed additional financial assistance:

#### **Rural Group**

Felicity: When you see a lot of case managers for something, for extra help and that, you’d think they were paying for it out of their own pocket.

#### **Christchurch Group (5)**

Ayla: It’s like it was coming out of your own pockets. Sitting there and you’re not actually paying for this. I would actually like to know if maybe they get brownie points for the less people

they actually serve that day, do they actually? It would be quite interesting. I bet they do.

In utilising this expression women imply that in making decisions to approve or refuse Special Needs Grants caseworkers are guided by material self-interest. In approving grants, case managers are acting as if it will result in a personal financial loss. Ayla takes this further using the colloquial phrase “brownie points” to suggest that Work and Income caseworkers may also gain career advantages by refusing to help their clients.

A strong rhetorical device used to construct an economic motivation for caseworker behaviour was the description of Work and Income staff bonuses. In the majority of the focus groups, participants argued that case managers received a financial incentive for either denying assistance or for reducing welfare numbers.

### **Christchurch Group (3)**

- Taylor: I remember years ago, it must have been three or four years ago, there was actually a thing in the Timaru Herald that Timaru was the stingiest Work and Income in New Zealand and they actually got Christmas bonuses for denying clients. So depending on how many ‘nos’ they’ve put in throughout the year pumped up their Christmas bonus.
- Ashleigh: I’m pretty sure you get a bonus when you get someone off the benefit don’t you?

### **Wellington Group**

- April: A lot of times they don’t give you what you’re entitled to. I’ve sort of heard a rumour, I don’t know whether it’s true, but a girl that I knew that worked for WINZ she said the ones at the top, they get bonuses for keeping the budget under a certain level.
- Kirsten: I believe that absolutely.
- Holly: Yip
- Kirsten: I believe that 100%.
- April: I thought yeah and that might be why a lot of the time you don’t get what you’re entitled to.

Suggesting that Work and Income case managers gain financially by reducing cost for the institution defines the relationship between case managers and beneficiaries in economic terms. If case managers are incentivised to reduce the amount that they grant beneficiaries, then their decisions have little to do with the welfare of their clients. Constituting case managers as benefiting from the suffering of vulnerable clients works to further emphasise how “bad” they actually are.

### **The role of the “good” case manager**

Not all case managers, however, were constituted in this way. Alongside descriptions of those who were “not sympathetic or pleasant or helpful”, were accounts of “good” case managers. While participants stressed that good case managers were a minority, by contrast they were helpful and understanding, would advise clients of their entitlements and view them as an individual with unique needs:

#### **Christchurch Group (5)**

Lydia: [The caseworker] said, ‘for the next six weeks, I don’t want you to do a thing about looking for work.’ She said, ‘take some time, sit back, relax, get yourself well, and then we’ll look at it again. I don’t want to see you again for six weeks. Go and get yourself better’. And I was just like - I was flabbergasted.

#### **Māori Group (1)**

Kiri ...which is so great that there’s people like [case manager’s name] at the [office name] office who will say, ‘Now, did you know that you can get this? Did you know you’re eligible?’//

Hine: Yeah, they tell you what you’re allowed  
Yeah.

Kiri: //‘Did you know that there’s all these other things?’ It just makes me think, ha ha, ha ha ha. All you other caseworkers who are trying to rob me and my babies of life.

These narratives performed a significant function in the group discussions.

Participants used accounts of good caseworkers as rhetorical contrasts predominantly to emphasise the unfairness of the treatment they received from bad caseworkers. Lydia was “flabbergasted” that a caseworker would be interested in her wellbeing. Kiri contrasts one caseworker who informed her of her entitlements

with others who were “trying to rob me and my babies of life”. Demonstrating that caseworkers could be helpful and considerate highlighted the appropriateness of this behaviour in the Work and Income context. By calling attention to occasions when caseworkers did treat their clients well, these descriptions gave strength to the underlying contention in many of the women’s accounts that all clients *should* be treated well. The infrequency of encounters with “good” Work and Income staff, however, further worked to emphasise how bad other case managers could be.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have drawn together participants’ accounts of their visits to Work and Income offices in order to highlight the emotional atmosphere of these spaces. The accounts themselves were often detailed: many of the women taking part in the groups had much to say about their visits. They spoke of being constantly regulated in their meetings at Work and Income, yet of having little understanding of the regulations that dictated their access to entitlements. The most severe criticism was directed at individual caseworkers who, many participants contended, treated them poorly and withheld information about entitlements. While the negative figure of the welfare mother was present throughout the narratives, she was countered by the affective character of the caseworker who was responsible for enforcing administrative practices that seemed designed to minimise entitlements. The presence of this character embedded affect into Work and Income offices, and the participants appeared to carry this forward as a memory (Wetherell, 2012) from meeting to meeting. As a result the women in the focus groups spoke of approaching their visits with anxiety and dread.

In each of the focus groups women expressed an intense dislike of the offices, and spoke of attempts to minimise the time they spent there. It is interesting to note that most participants described Work and Income offices as clean and modern. The way that the physical environment was arranged however meant not only did the women have little privacy, but they could also always clearly be identified as welfare recipients. Furthermore the way that events were managed and performed within

the offices – the excessive waiting; the intrusive questioning; the convoluted administrative processes that many did not understand; the treatment by staff; and their visibility – gave an emotional resonance to Work and Income offices that made them very unpleasant places to visit. The women’s stories were framed by feelings of fear and shame. Many also expressed frustration and anger as they described the administrative processes and the environment at Work and Income. It is to these broad patterns of emotion that I turn in the following chapter.

## **Anger and tears: Affect as a response in the welfare environment**

I got post-natal depression with [my son], so I used to take him [to Work and Income] and he'd be screaming the whole two, three hours that I was there. And I'd be getting judged and asked questions and like shushed and it would just make me so... I just cried. All the time that I went in. (Sam, Christchurch Group (5))

This chapter develops my discussion from preceding chapters as I focus attention on the affective responses of participants to wider discursive framings of lone mothers on welfare, and to the Work and Income setting. The chapter considers the emotional configurations surrounding shame, anger and tears in the women's talk. It examines the way that women like Sam used accounts of moments of strong affect to emphasise the injustices they perceived within the welfare setting. In Chapter Five I introduced Wetherell's (2012, p.89) notion of "multimodality" to describe the assembling of varied affective interactions into episodes of affective practice. Paying attention to "multimodality" similarly informs this chapter as I consider the way that shame coalesced with tears and anger giving intensity to the women's narratives as they discussed their experiences within the Work and Income environment.

We are living in a time in which emotional expression is tolerated more than ever before (Greco & Stenner, 2008). In the context of Western institutions such as Work and Income, however, displays of emotion are still largely deemed to be inappropriate. Scheff (2014, p.114) proposes that in an institutional setting the emphasis is on emotional restraint or what he refers to as "the suppression of the

social-emotional world". This suppression involves a privileging of rational thought and behaviour over demonstrative expression. In contrast, the analysis in this chapter highlights how much emotion is attached to welfare receipt. Many of the women in the focus groups spoke of feeling shame in relation to their visits to Work and Income. The chapter begins with a discussion of shame in the welfare context, before moving to analyse participants' affective reactions to these moments of shame. Chase and Walker (2013) propose that shame can undermine self-worth and one's sense of social cohesion. The analysis in this chapter, however, considers the way the shame often transformed in the women's accounts. I focus on this transformation and argue that it offered participants a way of collectively responding to their experiences of welfare receipt.

### **Shame and welfare**

This thesis began with the assertion that there is shame accompanying the receipt of welfare. My analysis in the previous two chapters has supported this claim. In Chapter Four I argued that participants' reliance upon welfare hampered attempts to constitute themselves as anything other than welfare recipients. The previous chapter highlighted how the shame associated with a welfare subjectivity is reinforced through everyday experiences in Work and Income offices that are charged with negative affect. This is particularly emphasised for lone mothers who encounter emotionally loaded discourses surrounding their mothering practices and their sexual irresponsibility. While, as the literature suggests, not all who receive welfare feel shame (Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney, 2012; McCormack, 2004; Rogers-Dillon, 1995) discussions within the focus groups indicated that it was a dominant emotion in the women's experiences of welfare receipt.

Ahmed (2014 p.112) writes of shame as an "intense and painful sensation" associated with how one feels about oneself. It originates from the feeling that one has done something wrong. Scheff (2003) contends that shame is related to our principles and our sense of morality. We feel shame when we feel these have been transgressed or when our position in society is disturbed. This offers a way of

understanding the intensity of the women's discussions as highlighted in the previous two chapters. It explains why the women spoke of feeling devalued by their inability to perform neoliberal citizenship, and it accounts for the affective atmosphere within the Work and Income offices. Shame is both a personal feeling and is intrinsically related to the social environment, and it is this "doubledness" between private and public experience that makes shame so unsettling (Probyn, 2005, p.331). The negative feeling associated with welfare receipt is often intensified by an awareness that others are bearing witness to one's shame.

This chapter considers participants' responses to the shame associated with welfare receipt. Much of it focuses on discussions of the shame that permeates Work and Income offices where beneficiaries are in close proximity to other beneficiaries, and where they can clearly be identified as welfare recipients. This is the shame induced by the Work and Income environment discussed in the previous chapter. The women in the focus groups returned to this topic over and over again. There is shame in being visible as a beneficiary, in being treated with contempt, and in being witnessed being treated with contempt. Much of this chapter analyses the way women spoke of reacting to the shame induced by these different aspects. My interest is in the complexity of shame as it metamorphosed into further affect that was evident in participants' talk of resisting, avoiding, or capitulating to its effect.

It was apparent throughout the focus groups that many of the women felt shame in being a client of Work and Income:

#### **Māori Group (1)**

- Kiri: Yeah. When you walk out [of Work and Income] it's like you can't put your glasses on fast enough and put your hood up and sprint out of that office. Like [take the] first bus. I just need to get to the bus stop.
- Caitlin: You don't even want to get on the bus eh? You're like, shucks, I'll walk.
- Kiri: I'll walk to the next stop so people don't know that I have been to WINZ. [Laughter]
- Caitlin: I've actual[ly] done that.



Kiri: I'm a going down to that pre-school bus stop so I look like I just went in there 'cause I'm a good mum. [Laughter]

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

Vicki: So I went in [to Work and Income] this day and as soon as I walked in, the doors opened and then it had a half-circle of chairs sitting and that's where everybody had to wait. So, I went up to the desk and I said, 'What's happening here?' and that's the new waiting area. So I was a bit upset and I said to the lady at the desk, I said, 'No, this is not on. It's like we're all sitting like animals in a cage'.

Vicki reported that every time a pedestrian walked past outside, the doors swung open revealing the Work and Income clients sitting inside facing the door.

Vicki: And yeah, so I didn't swear, I raised my voice a little bit and I said, 'No, this is wrong, you can't do this! This is humiliating'. And blow me down; I saw her eyes flick and the next minute two security guys come over. And I thought, 'Oh my God, are they gonna frog march me outta here?' I wanted to say, [mouths 'fuck off'] but I couldn't, because I was there//

Trudy: You needed your appointment.

Vicki: //I needed my appointment. So, I refused to sit, so I stood to the side and the security guards stood with me.

As in the previous chapter, these stories emphasise that shame is about being seen. In the first excerpt, the women joke about attempts to conceal themselves as they exit Work and Income offices. Kiri relates donning dark glasses and a hood as she quickly leaves the office and "sprints" to the bus stop. She recounts walking to catch a bus near a childcare centre in an attempt to replace the shameful identity of a welfare mother with that of "a good mum". Vicki's shame similarly relates to her visibility as a beneficiary. Like Kiri and Caitlin, Vicki does not want to be identified as a client of Work and Income outside of that context. Vicki's story begins when she enters Work and Income for an appointment to discover that the waiting area has been rearranged. Chairs have been placed around the entrance area in such a way as to make clients clearly visible to passers-by. For Vicki being made so visible is

“humiliating”. She uses the phrase “an animal in a cage” conjuring images of zoo animals on display for visitors to watch. This is the witnessing of shame that Ahmed (2014) proposes can reinforce one’s feelings of inadequacy. As in the first excerpt, Vicki’s response to having her identity as a beneficiary exposed is a desire for cover. Shame, as I have noted previously, is associated with how one appears to others and, consequently, it may provoke an urge to hide.

The image of a caged animal in this account also works to emphasise Vicki’s perceived powerlessness. Her shame at being made so visible is reinforced by the sense that she can do little to change this. Unlike Kiri, who having finished her appointment can disguise herself and run for the nearest bus stop, Vicki has no choice but to stay on display. Her attempts to protest are countered by the appearance of two security guards intending to “frog march” her out of the offices. The use of the word “frog march”, a phrase that is imbued with the imagery of force, further emphasises Vicki’s perceived lack of control in this situation. She is faced with the choice of accepting her increased visibility or going without the assistance she needs. In the end Vicki manages to negotiate a less conspicuous space within which to wait, setting herself apart from other clients by standing to the side so she cannot be seen by passers-by when the doors swing open.

### **Anger as a transformation of shame**

Vicki’s account is marked by two interrelated themes in relation to shame that repeated throughout the focus groups: the transformation of shame into anger, and the enforced regulation of this anger. Her narrative emphasises the way that feelings of shame can change. While initially Vicki claims to be merely “a bit upset”, when her attempts to discuss her concerns with a staff member are rebuffed, the shameful impact of the situation begins to sink in: it is “humiliating”. The assertion that she is humiliated is quickly followed by a sense of her rising anger. The emotional neutrality of the environment, however, is overwhelming. Vicki’s anger must be controlled; she cannot swear and express the way she really feels, but must suppress

her emotions in order to retain her appointment. It does not matter that she finds the new office layout “humiliating” she cannot visibly react to this.

Katz (1999) describes shame as moments of chaos felt as the body attempts to form a response to and ultimately escape a shameful situation. This response can be seen in the urge to hide as described in both accounts above. Where hiding is not possible, however, Katz (1999) argues that shame often transforms into anger. This metamorphosis, outlined clearly in Vicki’s narrative, emerged frequently in the data:

### **Auckland Group (2)**

Amanda: But when I had an actual caseworker it was just humiliating and I would just leave with this fury, just this tight fury because I felt like she was really condescending even though I’m pretty sure I’m more educated than her. I just felt like I was being spoken down to and just treated like an absolute idiot with no way of making it in the world.

### **Pacific Group (2)**

Tiresa: Sometimes [I] feel angry.  
Rose: Because they say to you, ‘Come 10 minutes early.’  
Claire: Oh, they tell you to come 10 minutes early?  
Rose: Yes, 10 minutes early.  
Tiresa: Yeah, then reach there 20 minutes early and then you have to wait, wait, wait past half an hour. And it’s like, ‘Okay’, But what’s [the case worker] doing? It’s just go this way, go this way, sitting there, nothing to do, never like, ‘Oh, she’s waiting for me’ When she’s had her time ... and now they say ‘Tiresa next’. My God come on.

Like Vicki, Amanda describes her interactions with her case manager as “humiliating”. She states her caseworker is “condescending” and justifies this statement by explaining that the woman treated her “like an absolute idiot”. The implication is that the caseworker categorised her in a particular way, failing to take into account Amanda’s individual strengths and circumstances. The humiliation that Amanda feels in response to “being spoken down to” transforms in her account into “fury”. Tiresa and Rose similarly recount feeling angry after long waits in Work and Income offices. As discussed in the previous chapter long wait times at Work and Income are often demeaning for clients. Both women emphasise that they arrive

early for their appointments – even earlier than the prescribed 10 minutes – but still find they must “wait, wait, wait” while the caseworker has “her time”. The longer the wait the angrier Tiresa becomes.

Katz (1999) has proposed that the transformation from shame into anger offers a discursive escape route from the inaction associated with shame. One function of anger is that it enables one to express (to oneself and others) that something is wrong (Fischer & Jansz, 2008). The women believe that they have valid reasons for becoming angry. Vicki is being asked to sit in a waiting room with doors that open out onto the street every few seconds, making her and her welfare dependency clearly visible to people outside. Amanda, who has a tertiary qualification, is being treated as if she is “an absolute idiot”. Tiresa and Rose, who have made efforts to get to Work on Income well in advance of their appointments, are not afforded the respect of being seen on time but are made to sit in the waiting room for extended periods of time. While shame may be seen to imply acceptance of a situation, the women’s anger is an intentional repudiation of their treatment at Work and Income.

It is clear from these accounts, however, that any such objections must be contained until after the women have left their meetings. Amanda is not able to express her fury, but must “leave with” it, taking her anger away from the environment that provoked it. Tiresa and Rose, while feeling angry, must sit quietly and wait until their caseworker decides to begin the meeting. There is a very clear understanding of what is considered appropriate behaviour within Work and Income offices. The repercussions for expressing anger are made explicit in Vicki’s narrative. While Vicki emphasises that she is in control and containing her anger “I didn’t swear”, at the same time she wants to address her concerns with the receptionist. She raises her voice stating “this is wrong”, a protest that she relates is misinterpreted as a threat by the receptionist. There is no opportunity to correct this misreading, however, security guards are quickly called and Vicki discovers she must either accept the situation or leave the offices and lose her appointment. The consequences of becoming angry were reiterated throughout the groups:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Jessie: That's hard too if you go in there [Work and Income] and you're treated really badly; if you kick up a fuss about it then they'll just kick you out of the building.  
Yeah.
- Jessie: And there's that worry as well that you could lose your benefit. So you can't really pipe up and say, 'Why are you looking at me like that?'...
- Holly: It's like standover tactics.

### **Rural Group**

- Piper: Last time I went in there I got quite upset with the woman. She'd said to me, 'What's gone wrong with your budget' I was so stressed about money, waking up stressed about it, stressed about it all day, going to sleep thinking about it. I did raise my voice to her a bit and just said 'this is what I'm paying for, these are the costs, blah, blah, blah' and then I thought oh gosh I really need her to give me a food grant so you have to sort of go, 'oh I'm so sorry, I'm just so stressed out'. Whereas, actually you don't feel sorry. You feel perfectly entitled to say what you've said but you need her to cooperate and give you something so you have to [have your] hands out and begging, begging a bit.

Holly's response, which describes the implied threat of losing part or all of one's benefit as "standover tactics", resonates with Vicki's use of the phrase "frog march" above, and Piper's comments of having her "hands out and begging". The women have all chosen terms charged with meaning implying significant imbalances of power. In Vicki's case she was referring to being physically forced into compliance, in the other two accounts there is the suggestion that the women feel pressure to comply emotionally. There can be no reaction to the shame of being "spoken down to" or being looked at in a way that implies contempt. While such incidents might provoke anger the women are aware they need to contain this during their encounters at Work and Income. If they fail to hide their feelings, as Piper did, they must immediately apologise for responding in a way deemed to be inappropriate. The women acknowledge that reacting in a negative way can have a significant impact on the claiming of entitlements.

### **Anger: Damage and destruction**

The women's accounts of anger work to justify and rationalise its emergence.

Emotion, particularly anger, is often conceptualised as chaotic and antisocial. As Fischer and Jansz (2008) propose, Western societies make sense of anger as a bodily response that disrupts rational thought and behaviour. Anger is often interpreted as destructive, and anxiety about the potential for it to be acted out can justify measures taken for control, and play a significant role in the formulation of security guidelines within welfare organisations (Hoggett, 2000; Pinkney, 2011). Hoggett (2000) contends that:

A state of internal fear ... always precedes the experience of external threat ... once the 'danger within' has been externalised in this way then the establishment can get to work, offering its protection, keeping the threat at bay, zapping intruders, policing the boundaries. (p.69)

The defensive institutional response of many welfare organisations, like Work and Income, demonstrates little tolerance for dissent. Policies designed to regulate the anger of clients can be seen as a way of limiting the potential for emotion to transform into something more threatening. Clients are externalised, labelled as potentially dangerous, and their behaviour policed. Since 2014, the Ministry of Social Development has increased the average number of security guards per Work and Income office from one to two. Larger offices may employ up to three security guards (Massive scale-up, 2015).<sup>48</sup> Since the beginning of 2017, security guards are required to check the personal identification of all clients before they can enter the building. The underlying subtext behind both security initiatives is that clients present a threat to staff. The very presence of the security guards at Work and

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<sup>48</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, in May 2016 Raymond John Tully was convicted of the 2014 murders of Ashburton Work and Income receptionist Peggy Turuhira Noble and caseworker Susan Leigh Cleveland. He was also convicted of the attempted murder of Kim Elizabeth Adams. The Ministry of Social Development was subsequently convicted for failing to take all practicable steps to protect its staff. New security measures are a response to this ruling.

Income constitutes clients as “the danger within” (Hoggett, 2000. p.69). The guards are there to keep Work and Income staff safe from this danger.

Vicki’s account demonstrates the way that anger constitutes clients of Work and Income in a particular way. As Vicky raises her voice, the receptionist’s “eyes flick” indicating to security guards that she needs assistance. Vicki is assessed by the receptionist as becoming angry and constituted as a threat. Yet while the feeling of anger is commonly conflated with its performance (Scheff, 2015), by Vicki’s account she is in control of her emotions. It seems that it is the fear of aggression that constitutes her as aggressive rather than her actual behaviour. This illustrates the impossible situation that Vicki is faced with. She can either accept a situation that she clearly finds objectionable or she can protest and risk being categorised as dangerous and aggressive; a categorisation that denies her access to a caseworker.

While there were clearly implications to expressing anger within the Work and Income environment, many of the women I spoke to proposed that containing anger was also problematic. Drawing upon the same trope that constitutes anger as destructive they argued that anger is dangerous when confined in bodies, and therefore needs to be released before any damage is done. In employing this image the women are implying that there is a risk to containing their emotion and that the “healthy expressive release of negative affect” should be permitted (Wilce & Price, 2008, p.229). Utilising this understanding of anger, a number of women proposed that the emotional disadvantage they experienced at Work and Income could have a detrimental effect in other areas of their lives:

**Auckland Group (1)**

Lisa: I’ll walk out [of] there [Work and Income] and I’m angry and then that goes to the kids or the person, I’m driving a car or I’m getting worked up and have a car crash or I’ll fall down stairs...

**Māori Group (3)**

Frances: With me and my friends what we most, what I find that everyone mostly talks about is ranting and being angry about an appointment they’ve just had. They’ll go on and on about

that for ages. It won't just end that one day, it will end up coming up again and just all of the energy.

Danielle: It's always negative eh?

Frances: Negative energy that comes out of an appointment or all of the effort that they have to put in.

Lisa recounts leaving her appointments angry and the impact of this on those around her. Similarly Danielle and Frances talk about the residual effect of anger, the "negative energy" that lingers long after Work and Income appointments. Anger is constructed in these two accounts in very particular way. It is an emotion contained in one context that then spills over and contaminates another. By containing her anger, Lisa argues that she risks harming herself or those around her. Danielle and Frances talk about the enduring consequences of their anger. This is anger that becomes stuck inside the women draining their energy and driving them to act in destructive ways.

Looking at these accounts draws attention to what Wetherell (2012) has labelled emotional capital. As Vicki's story illustrates, who has the power to assume specific emotional positions is predetermined in these interactions. Wetherell (2012) has argued that power is an integral aspect of the study of emotion and affective practice. It leads us to question:

Who gets to do what when? Who is emotionally privileged, who is emotionally disadvantaged and what does this privilege and disadvantage look like? (p.17)

It is clear from the accounts that the women felt emotionally at a disadvantage. Vicki wanted to tell the security guard to "fuck off" but "couldn't, because I ... needed my appointment". Amanda could not express the "tight fury" inside of her. Piper was "waking up stressed about [money], stressed about it all day, going to sleep thinking about it", but she has to hide her feelings of frustration at the case manager's implication that she has mismanaged her welfare payments. The women's accounts indicate their fear that reacting to provocation will have financial repercussions.



While caseworkers, as Frances pointed out, “can speak to me however they want”, for the women cited here expressing their feelings is not an option.

### **Expressing anger at Work and Income**

Hochschild (1983) proposes that emotion is governed by social rules. She contends that there are “feeling rules” that direct the emotion that we should or should not display in a particular situation (Hochschild, 1983, p.56). These rules function like a script (Anderson, 2014; Hochschild, 1983): they can be strictly adhered to; improvised upon; or they can be broken altogether. While many of the women’s accounts were constructed to emphasise the work involved in containing their anger at Work and Income – and the injustice and damage concomitant with this – there were occasions when the women related losing their tempers:

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

Sam: I went into Work and Income when my youngest one was a few weeks old, and he kept screaming hard out; and the lady behind [the desk] was a total bitch. And she was like, ‘Oh, how come your youngest baby’s a different colour to your oldest one?’ And I said, ‘Oh, because obviously it’s a different dad’. And she said, ‘Well where’s the dad?’ I said – because I had them with him – but I just said, ‘Oh, it was a one-night stand’. She said, ‘So you just go out having one night stands and having kids?’ And I said, ‘Why do I have to explain that?’ And he kept screaming and screaming and she kept shaking her head real[ly] obviously and then I was trying to get food and after he’d screamed for about 20 minutes, she printed me off all these parenting courses and stuff. She said, ‘Oh, I will help you with food today but only on the condition that you agree to go to some of these’. And I looked at her; I said ‘you’re fucking kidding me’. I was so mad. I was like, ‘shove them up your arse’.

#### **Christchurch Group (3)**

Taylor: I was too young and the law had changed that year so I couldn’t get [a benefit] and then when I finally could I was also moving out of home and I went to WINZ ‘cause I had to pay a letting fee on the house that I was renting and I didn’t realise, they [the rental agency] didn’t tell me. It was just under \$200 so I had no money for groceries and I went to WINZ to get my benefit sorted and try and get a food grant or something. The

case worker told me that he was sick of us solo mothers thinking we could come in and get what we wanted and basically called me a piece of scum. So I just let loose at him and he just said, flat out to my face, 'I'm not gonna give you a food grant, what are you gonna do? How are you gonna support your daughter?' ... I yelled at him pretty loud and then walked off and went and spoke to someone else and they took me through. He was meant to be my case manager so I just flat out refused to ever have contact with him. But that kind of set the precedent, like I won't go to Work and Income and ask for anything now.

In both of these narratives the women recount losing financially as a result of becoming angry during a meeting with their case manager. Sam relates visiting Work and Income with her two children, one of whom is only a few weeks old and cries incessantly throughout the meeting. In Sam's account, she becomes increasingly annoyed with the caseworker's apparent disapproval – "shaking her head real[ly] obviously" – and seemingly irrelevant questions in relation to the children's fathers. Sam initially responds by mocking the woman's questions. In response to her case manager asking "where's the dad?" Sam provocatively replies that she had the child after a one-night stand. When the caseworker states that she must attend a parenting course in order to receive a Special Needs Grant Sam finally loses her temper refusing the information pamphlets and telling the other woman to "shove them up your arse". Taylor similarly recounts approaching Work and Income for assistance with food and having an altercation with a caseworker who insulted and seemingly provoked her into losing her temper. She relates how the staff member taunted her as he refused her the grant she needed to feed her child. In her account she "yelled at him pretty hard" before demanding to see another caseworker. The effects of her experience are ongoing; she "won't go to Work & Income and ask for anything now".

As noted above, there was an awareness in all of the focus groups that reacting in a negative way at Work and Income could impact on one's ability to access

entitlements. This is clearly the outcome in Sam and Taylor's accounts; the women have had to forgo financial assistance as a result of their outbursts. Manifested in these accounts is the implication that their angry outbursts are not entirely appropriate. The women therefore work hard to rationalise their reactions to others in the group. Sam offers a detailed description of the caseworker's insulting behaviour. She explains that she took exception to the insinuation that she was a mother with poor parenting skills who had multiple children to different fathers in order to claim benefits. Taylor emphasises that she felt unfairly characterised as a young single mother who was completely dependent on the state. Both women's stories highlight the provocation of the Work and Income caseworker involved in an attempt to justify why they expressed the anger they felt at the time.

The way the women structure their accounts demonstrates Fischer and Jansz's (2008, p.173) contention that in narratives where people relate inappropriate emotional reactions "repair work has to be done". Sam and Taylor's accounts are lengthy. As noted in the previous chapter, accounts of anger are often lengthy. In general when women in the focus groups described losing their tempers, such descriptions were embedded in complex narratives in which women sought to justify their emotional reaction by outlining in detail the provocation that led to their outburst. These narratives of anger not only provided a description of the women's outbursts, but also worked to construct the anger they displayed as reasonable to the group. It appeared important to Sam, Taylor, and others who described angry outbursts, that those listening to their accounts understood the full circumstances behind their reactions.

### **Anger in the focus groups**

Accounts of anger, while often drawing upon the trope of anger as destructive were not, however, always negative within the focus group context. Sam and Taylor's accounts, for example, show how anger motivated them to mount a protest against their caseworkers. While this response came at a significant cost, it did enable them to reject implications of welfare dependency and poor parenting, facilitating their

constitution as mothers independently providing for their children. For all of the women who expressed anger within the focus groups, their emotion appeared to be a resource they could utilise to form a response to Work and Income. Anger enabled the women to draw a sharp line between themselves and their caseworkers. In making their feelings of anger acceptable, they were able to emphasise how unacceptable they found the policies, processes, and the staff behaviour they encountered at Work and Income.

In writing about feminist anger, Ahmed (2014, p.175) reframes anger in a positive way as creativity and passion. Citing activist Audre Lorde who proposed that “anger is loaded with information and energy”, Ahmed’s (2014, p.175) analysis of anger emphasises its potential to be constructed as not merely “against something” but “for something” else. As a response to shame, anger offers a means of shifting attention away from oneself (Katz, 1999) and towards the injustices experienced at the hands of others. As the accounts above indicate, the anger expressed in relation to welfare infused the accounts with energy as the women complained about their experiences. The women utilised anger to create distance from the shamed identity of a beneficiary. While their accounts of shame may have implied an acceptance that there was something shameful about their situation, the energy in the women’s accounts of their anger worked against any such implication.

Anger was generally recognised in the focus groups as a valid reaction to many of the situations participants encountered at Work and Income – despite the fact that they often did not express it at the time – and talk of feeling angry often generated animated discussions. Discussions of past anger, as Skeggs (2011) has similarly noted in relation to her research with women in poverty, can indicate a shared understanding of transgressions, and create a collective response to injustice. Within the focus groups participants were able to articulate and rationalise emotions that were inappropriate at Work and Income. The women’s talk of anger worked to normalise emotion that was prohibited in their everyday encounters with the welfare provider. The underlying contention in many of the women’s accounts was that their feelings were reasonable. In the focus groups surrounded by others in the

same situation as themselves they could freely talk about and rationalise their emotions and, in the process, form a collective response to many of the situations they encountered at Work and Income.

### **Crying and shame**

As I have noted, displays of emotion are largely inappropriate in institutional spaces such as Work and Income. The tolerance of staff at Work and Income, however, appeared to vary depending on the emotion concerned. Many of the women spoke about crying during their meetings.<sup>49</sup> While, displaying anger would see security guards called in, tears elicited no such response. Yet although Work and Income practices may not have demanded the immediate cessation of tears, the women clearly perceived crying to be unseemly. At times tears, like anger, appeared to be a reaction to shame but, where anger was shame transformed, crying, or what McAvoy (2015 p.30) has referred to as the “semiotics of affect”, was in itself demeaning intensifying rather than reworking the women’s shame.

Accounts of almost crying, feeling like crying, and actually crying during encounters in Work and Income offices occurred often in the focus groups:

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

Brooke: I wanted to apply for a house one time. .... I’d been looking for four months and I finally was accepted for one by the real estate company and all I needed help was with the bond, which I would’ve paid back. And I went in [to Work and Income] and [the caseworker] was like, ‘No, you can’t have this house, it’s too expensive’. And I said, ‘Yes, but I’m gonna get a flat mate. I just need two weeks to get a flat mate’. And she goes, ‘Oh, when do you have to sign the papers?’ And I said, ‘Tomorrow’. And she goes, ‘Oh, you’ve got 24 hours [to find someone]’. And I said, ‘I have a child. I can’t just have whoever I want, like the next person off the street to come and live with me’. And she was like, ‘Oh, well you’ll have to find somewhere cheaper’, and she’s showing me all of them online. And I was like, ‘I know that there are cheaper houses, but you’re not necessarily guaranteed’. Like, you go to a

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<sup>49</sup> While talk of tears was widespread throughout the groups, none of the Pacific women spoke of crying, despite relating some particularly harrowing experiences.

viewing and there's 40 different people there. And she just couldn't understand and I was there for two hours I think and I ended up leaving in tears. [Laughs]

### **Christchurch Group (2)**

- Ana: I mean, you're not there because you've just had an awesome experience and so I was worried that I might become tearful. I'm okay with that in an appropriate setting, but not necessarily with everyone else. Some look like they're trying to contain it.
- Tania: I have done that before in Work and Income, I have balled my eyes out ... She [caseworker] started laying out my budget and stuff and at the start she was really nice and I was like, okay, cool, we can do this. And then she's seeing what I spent my money on and how I did it and apparently it was too much and she's just busy going, 'well, this is wrong. You need to cut this down. You need to cut this down'... a newborn baby, three year old and I've got \$70 for food. It was just like, \$70, [for groceries] really? Almost \$40 of that is just nappies, and formula; you kidding me? But she was one of these really old school people, like, 'You should breastfeed and you should use cloth nappies'. No. 'Disposable is so much' ... she was really intimidating. By the end of it I was just like I'd had enough. I balled my eyes out and left.

There is shame throughout these accounts as the women describe being treated in ways that threatens their sense of agency but which they seemingly feel powerless to refute. Brooke relates being declined assistance with bond for a rental property that it is has taken her four months to find. Despite her attempts to explain that she will find a flatmate to assist with rent after securing the property, her caseworker refuses to process her request. Tania relates being told that she is managing her money inappropriately. Her attempts to justify her expenditure are met by counter arguments further undermining decisions she has made regarding feeding and clothing her children. This is the shame that Brooke described earlier in her focus group of having one's independence undermined and being spoken to "like you don't know your own life". In these accounts, however, there is also the added shame of public tears. While Brooke laughs as she relates leaving the office in tears, the laugh is one of self-consciousness. She is aware that she has done something inappropriate. As Ana points out, there are a number of rules surrounding crying in

front of others. In Western culture crying in formal institutional settings, such as Work and Income, is deemed socially inappropriate and to cry in such a place is to demonstrate a breaking of these rules (Vingerhoets, 2013). In these accounts shame is both the cause and the result of the women's tears.

In some of the women's accounts shame appeared to provide the trigger for tears. In other narratives feelings of powerlessness or helplessness were argued to elicit tears. All accounts of crying, however, were based around the implication that crying *induced* shame. Despite the cultural association of women with tears (Lutz, 1986; 2008) it was very clear from the women's stories that they felt crying was inappropriate in the Work and Income setting. Descriptions of leaving Work and Income after bursting into tears often concluded a narrative. Jackie left the office "in tears"; Brooke finished her account with the statement "I ended up leaving in tears"; Frances stated that when she started crying "I just got up and left"; Tania told the group "I balled my eyes out and left". Crying in public is shameful, particularly when it fails to elicit a response from those who provoke the tears. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is shaming to have others witness your shame. The desire to get away from the situation aligns with the discussion relating to shame and visibility earlier in the chapter: feeling shame provoked the urge to hide and when they begin crying the women seek to leave the offices as quickly as possible.

### **Crying as affective-discursive practice**

The willingness and frequency with which the women shared their narratives of crying during the focus groups, however, emphasises the need to consider the important discursive work these accounts perform. Despite the obvious embarrassment of a tearful reaction in the Work and Income context, the women were not vilifying themselves for breaking down in tears, but instead appeared to use descriptions of crying to emphasise the inappropriateness of their treatment in the welfare environment:

### **Wellington Group**

Kirsten: I went to find out what I was eligible for and what the stand down period was and how to apply. And then I worked out all my timing and I had the conversation with the partner about [how] the marriage was gonna end and then I went into WINZ and I brought all the documentation and they said 'yeah, that's great, you're gonna get this much on this date' and I went 'great'. Waited patiently, the ten days or whatever first payment date it didn't come. I went in and said I was expecting a payment and they said 'oh yeah there was a mistake, we'll put it in tomorrow'. And it was 10% of what I had been told it was going to be and this is when I sobbed so I went back and I was like 'what am I gonna get and when am I gonna get it?' They made me feel like I was in the wrong and I didn't know what was happening and for me the unknown was scary.

### **Auckland Group (1)**

Jackie: [The caseworker] made it really difficult; I brought in all the papers I was supposed to, I found it very, very overwhelming. I left in tears. I mean okay, I was still pregnant so I was quite hormonal. I was probably eight and a half, nine months anyway. I just wanted to find out because I've got a mortgage and that was it, I got my little two-bedroom place by me, no family help, no partner help and ... I was scared, am I gonna be in a position that I'm gonna have to lose it? ... [The caseworker] was not gonna tell me any of that or I felt like he wasn't gonna tell me.

These two accounts are remarkably similar. Both women describe going into Work and Income to enquire about welfare entitlements. Kirsten needed to know the information in order to find out if she could make the decision to end her marriage. Jackie, already pregnant, was about to leave work to have her baby. The women talk about being "scared" in relation to their capacity to support themselves and their children. Both women undertake what I referred to in the context of anger earlier in the chapter as "repair work" (Fischer & Jansz, 2008, p.173), taking the time to emphasise how reasonable it was to cry in that situation. As if concerned that her story might not completely justify her tears, Jackie precedes it with the admission that she was pregnant, implying that this may have increased her susceptibility to crying. Kirsten highlights that after "waiting patiently" she found that she had been given the incorrect information regarding entitlements. Both women emphasise that



they have met all of their obligations to Work and Income. In providing this contextual information the two women establish that their tears are a reasonable response to an unfair situation.

In telling their stories, the women appeared to draw from common discursive resources relating to crying. Vingerhoets (2013) has written at length about crying. He contends:

A crying individual is generally regarded as someone who needs sympathy and help. However ... crying individuals may also be regarded very negatively, as passive, emotionally unstable, manipulative, and weak ... specific context is very important – crying is a powerful response for eliciting aid and succor, but only if there is a valid reason for showing this reaction. (p.118)

As Vingerhoets (2013) notes, the context is crucial to these narratives. The women seemed aware that in telling their stories, they risked appearing unstable and weak and so, as with accounts of anger, they often mitigated this by offering detailed (and lengthy) justifications for their tears.

In creating these narratives, the women seemed not only aware of what accounts of being driven to tears might say about them, but also what these stories conveyed about Work and Income staff. In many of the accounts of crying the women's tears were used to draw attention to the behaviour of caseworkers. In the previous chapter I proposed that the women specifically blamed Work and Income staff for the difficulties they experienced and actively engaged in discursive practices that framed caseworkers as bad and their actions unreasonable. The women's use of crying narratives functioned in a similar way. It is clear that the women viewed crying in this context as inappropriate. However, rather than blaming themselves, they went to great lengths to establish that it was Work and Income staff who were at fault:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Caitlin: Well, I waited two months when I was homeless and then I went to a different person. I had a different person then she made me wait a month. I don't know. She was rude. She was asking me questions that didn't even apply. I don't know; I just thought it was funny. I just didn't know what to say to her. She was gonna make me cry. It was like, so I'm going to bring up my whole background now.
- Kiri: So many times I've felt like I was gonna cry at WINZ.
- Caitlin: I was actual[ly] gonna cry. I was like, oh my gosh.
- Holly: I have cried at WINZ.
- Kiri: Yeah, I think I might have too.

### **Māori Group (3)**

- Frances: ... they [caseworkers] belittle you like this and strip you naked in front of everybody and even when you're crying, sitting there because they keep cutting you off and treating you like a child.
- Danielle: I think they like it.
- Frances: Yeah even when I was crying she [caseworker] had no sense of understanding or empathy at all and I just, I just got up and left.
- Danielle: I've done that a couple of times too
- Frances: I see people doing it all the time, getting really upset and just having to leave because they don't, they look around and they're just like, got to get out of here, can't handle it and that sucks that you get put in that sort of position to have to feel like that for what is so called our entitlements as being a New Zealand citizen or a caregiver or a parent.

In these accounts the participants discuss occasions when they have cried or been close to tears during their meetings at Work and Income. The first example is an excerpt from a lengthy account in which Caitlin detailed how she had to see two caseworkers and wait three months before she could to get assistance when she was pregnant and homeless. In the second example, which resonates with Brooke and Tania's accounts above, Frances recounts being treated "like a child" unable to make decisions for herself or her family. She describes encountering caseworkers at Work and Income who "belittle you ... and strip you naked in front of everybody"; she talks of witnessing others leaving the offices in tears. Both of these accounts emphasise that caseworkers have acted insensitively towards their clients. Caitlin describes her caseworker as "rude" asking her questions that were inappropriate. Frances is even more unequivocal; caseworkers have "no sense of understanding or empathy".

Danielle concurs, and further argues that caseworkers “like it” when a client cries. The women’s accounts emphasise that responsibility for the women’s crying lies entirely with the staff at Work and Income. Constituting case managers as deliberately provoking tears or even enjoying the suffering of their clients, as Danielle suggests, aligns with the discussion in the previous chapter emphasising how “bad” many staff at Work and Income are perceived to be.

Talk of crying not only served the purpose of vilifying Work and Income caseworkers it also worked to engage other focus group participants in the conversation. Katz’s (1999, p.193) description of crying as a “discourse strategy”, employed at times when the strategies of others have rendered individuals speechless, particularly resonates in Caitlin’s account. Caitlin highlights what she felt were overly intrusive personal questions from a caseworker that she found difficult to answer: “I just didn’t know what to say to her”. She also appears to struggle to articulate to the focus group how this made her feel repeating “I don’t know” twice, eventually resorting to “she was gonna make me cry” to get her point across. Responses from the other women indicate however that, despite not stating how she felt, Caitlin has effectively expressed herself to the group. Her story of being moved to tears leads to accounts of crying from other participants. There is an intensity in these statements that appears to go beyond what can be expressed in narrative form, but this obfuscation does not detract from the accounts. The women do not need to articulate what crying means to them for it to mean something to the other members of the focus group.

Tears in adults indicate that something very important is at stake, but at the same time the meaning behind the tears can be ambiguous (Katz, 1999; Vingerhoets, 2013). Katz (1999) proposes that, as crying is not a language, tears may obscure the meaning behind a response. Detailed explanations of the circumstances surrounding episodes when Caitlin, Kiri and Holly cried emerged at other points during the focus group. Caitlin explained that by continually alluding to her upbringing the caseworker made her feel like “my family are just terrible”; Kiri reported feeling like crying because “nobody wants to admit that they need help and support”; and Holly

recounted that she began to cry after a Work and Income caseworker refused her application for money to hire a pump that would enable her to continue breastfeeding her premature daughter in hospital. These explanations justified the women's crying to the group but were not necessary for the other members of the focus group to realise something significant had taken place.

Using statements that one cried during meetings with Work and Income staff both concealed the exact meaning behind the episode and allowed the women to make their feelings meaningful for each other. Not naming specific emotions left the other focus group participants free to interpret how they would have felt had they been in a similar situation. They did not need to share identical experiences to connect with others in the group: as Ahmed (2014, p.63) explains affect does not begin and end with language "what passes [between bodies] is not the same affect, and it depends on (mis)reading the other's feelings". It was this (mis)reading that appeared to encourage group members to add their own accounts of crying. As with anger, these group narratives of tears enabled the women to validate their emotional responses, castigating those who made them cry further establishing the affective figure of the caseworker. That caseworkers could "make [people] cry" emphasises the role Work and Income staff played in these episodes of affective practice.

## **Conclusion**

As much of the thesis to this point has demonstrated, shame is one emotion deemed appropriate in the welfare setting. The women often talked about feeling shame in relation to welfare receipt. The emotion in the women's accounts was related to wider discursive framings of beneficiaries, and appeared intensified by their treatment within the welfare offices. Shame was one of a number of emotions that could transform into tears, and many participants spoke about crying during their visits to Work and Income. These tears were always the cause of further shame. The women often spoke about shame limiting their visits to Work and Income offices. As Ahmed (2014) proposes, the way that shame works on bodies – compelling us to turn away from those who shame us or witness our shame – means that it plays a

significant role in the formation of social spaces. Feeling shame resulted in participants cutting their appointments short or going without rather than visiting offices to request assistance.

While shame shaped many of the women's interactions within Work and Income offices, it was not the only emotion experienced there. The participants also talked extensively about feeling angry, and of crying during their meetings. As in the previous chapter, this chapter has drawn attention to the different modes of activity in participants' affective practices (Wetherell, 2012). My intention in this chapter has been to highlight the patterning in the women's accounts of shame as it metamorphosed into tears and anger and the work that this did within the focus groups. I argue that while anger and tears may be perceived as unseemly, they were not always perceived to be negative. The women's stories of how they became angry or cried added an affective intensity to the accounts as they argued against the injustices they experienced in the process of collecting their welfare entitlements.

This chapter draws attention to rules (Hochschild, 1983) that guide the expression of emotion at Work and Income. This notion of "feeling rules" accounts for the shame that the many of the women proposed they felt in relation to their welfare receipt. Clients may display a shamed demeanour and they can cry, but they cannot show any outward sign of anger. While the women talked about crying at Work and Income, their anger was generally only expressed in the focus groups. This emphasises the emotional hierarchy within the welfare environment. Clients of Work and Income must keep their feelings of anger in check for fear of losing out on entitlements. All displays of emotion are mediated by an awareness of how staff at Work and Income will read them; the reading (or misreading) of anger as aggressive behaviour can have significant financial implications. This is the authoritative gaze referred to in the previous chapter as bodies are managed and disciplined by their environment. That the women felt compelled to moderate their emotions draws attention to role of power in affective practice. The analysis in this chapter reaffirms Burkitt's (2014, p.150) argument that "emotion is always interwoven in power

relations, both shaping and being shaped by them” further underscoring the theme of power that runs throughout this thesis.

## **“This is ridiculous”: Laughter, humour and the receipt of welfare<sup>50</sup>**

It’s not even worth getting emotionally invested and using up your energy so you just let it go. Most of the times if I do get riled I’ll just make a joke. It’s the best way of going about things, just laughing about it and letting it wash off (Desiree, Auckland Focus Group (1)).

In this chapter I consider the laughter that featured in the focus groups I conducted. This was not laughter that occurred during interactions in the welfare offices: the women did not appear to find these interactions remotely funny at the time. Instead it was the laughter that punctuated the focus groups as the women used humour to augment their narratives of these exchanges. This is laughter provoked by the type of humour that Michael Billig (2005, p.202) labels as “rebellious”, that which mocks and contests social rules. While a number of participants gave examples of being ridiculed and laughed at by welfare caseworkers – laughter Billig (2005, p.202) refers

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<sup>50</sup> Portions of this chapter are forthcoming in Gray, C. (in press) “This is ridiculous”: Laughter, humour and the receipt of welfare. *New Zealand Sociology*.

to as “disciplinary” – in this chapter I focus exclusively on the former and consider what it offered the women who took part in the research.<sup>51</sup>

Cate Watson (2015) proposes that laughter offers an interesting perspective from which to consider the relationship between individuals and institutions. Watson (2011) herself utilised humour to critique the individual-institutional relationship in her own workplace. In considering laughter and humour, I examine the relationship between the participants in my research and Work and Income. I am not looking to make light of the experiences of the women who took part in the research, but rather to consider the purpose laughter served as the women drew attention to absurdities in many of the situations they faced. My analysis focuses specifically on the humorous laughter that featured within the focus groups, often as a response to narratives involving the challenging of social boundaries within Work and Income. I begin the chapter with an explanation of the “transgressive humour” (Kuipers, 2009, p.230) that dominated the focus groups. I then consider the work that joking “did” within the focus groups. I examine the way that humour and laughter offered a release from the tension of talking about difficult situations with Work and Income, and a response to these events. The final part of the chapter focuses on the women’s affective practices (Wetherell, 2012), as I highlight laughter’s capacity to transform the negative affect that characterised accounts of interactions within the welfare system.

### **Making sense of humour and laughter**

Donna Goldstein (2013) writes that the meaning of laughter can be vague and difficult to decipher. In other parts of the analysis I had the women’s words as explanation; they told me that they had been angry or that they had cried, and often

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<sup>51</sup> In this chapter I consider the similarities in the way women in the focus groups used humour and laughter. I am not suggesting that differences do not exist in the use of humour and laughter between people of different ethnicities. Holmes and Hay (1997) and Holmes (2007) have argued that Māori utilise humour in ways that reflect cultural values and practices. Humour and laughter are said to have specific meaning in Pacific cultures. Māhina (2008) proposes that laughter and humour have particular functions in Tongan society. Similarly, comedy has a long history in Samoan culture of ridiculing those in authority (O'Donnell and Tweddle, 2003). There were, however, significant similarities in the ways in which the women in different focus groups employed humour and laughter, and it is these similarities that inform the discussion.



gave detailed rationalisations for these displays of emotion. Their laughter, on the other hand, was often ambiguous. A number of the women appeared to laugh because they were nervous, there were some bitter, humourless laughs and there were occasions when it was difficult to pinpoint any real reason for the laughter. Certainly not all laughter is humorous; laughter can defy analysis, or it can lend itself to positive or negative interpretation.

In the discussions humour was clearly dependent on the specific context of each focus group. In several of the groups, for example, women made a joke of taking tired or hungry children to Work and Income in an effort to speed up their appointment times:

### **Māori Group (3)**

Frances: Like I was saying before, sometimes I take my daughter in there on purpose because eventually she'll start screaming and a few times she's started screaming and they've come up and gone, 'Frances?' I'm like 'yes? [Laughter] I'm here.'

### **Christchurch Group (5)**

Annie: I said [to my daughters] 'Look, the lady will see us when she sees us'. [They said] 'But we're hungry'. I'm like, 'yeah, I know. This is why I'm here. I'm here to get a food grant'. [The girls replied] 'Well, I hope they hurry up, because we need something for tea'. [Laughter] And I said, 'yes, I do realise we need something for tea'. Five minutes later I was seen. [Laughter]

Lydia: Excellent, train your children. [Laughter]

The laughter in response to both of these accounts was loud and long lasting. The other participants in the group appeared to appreciate stories of circumventing long wait times in Work and Income offices. In the second example, Lydia follows up with a comment clearly emphasising her enjoyment of the story and eliciting more laughter from the group. However, a variation on the same joke was made in another focus group that was not well received by other members. While two participants appeared to find it very funny, joking about crying children seemed to make other women in the group uncomfortable and they did not join in the laughter.

Watson (2015) draws attention to the contested relationship between humour and laughter. Certainly not all laughter is humorous; conversely not all attempts at humour are met with laughter. Yet, as Watson (2015) argues, what is perceived as humorous typically prompts some form of laughter in response. For this reason, I generally considered humour and laughter together. In deciding what to include for analysis I examined both the intention of the narrator and the way a joke was received by the rest of the group (Holmes & Hay, 1997). My interest, as noted above, was humorous laughter and so my analytic emphasis was on successful humour, that which both the speaker and the audience found amusing. In defining the humour they selected for analysis, Holmes and Marra (2002, p.67) described it as “utterances [that] are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues,<sup>52</sup> as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants”. Similarly, I included for analysis those statements that aimed to be funny and that some of the focus group participants appeared to find funny as signalled through their laughter, their agreement, and/or their follow-up comments.

### **Transgressive humour and incongruity**

The humour in the examples above, as in many of the examples throughout this chapter, is black or gallows humour, that in which someone is laughing at bleak, unpleasant or seemingly hopeless circumstances. While the term gallows humour evolved from a specific situation involving a victim about to meet their death, it has now developed to include humour referring to any painful situation, particularly one that is ongoing (Freud, 1928; Moran & Massam, 1997). This is humour that has come to be recognised, and even accepted, as a reaction to a seemingly impossible dilemma.

Black humour often relies on social incongruity and the transgressing of social boundaries. In the previous chapter I argued that participants felt constrained by the

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<sup>52</sup> For example what the speaker says and how they say it. This could include their intonation, tone, stress, volume and facial expressions.

requirement to behave in a certain way during their meetings with Work and Income. My analysis in that chapter indicated a clear privileging of rational thought and behaviour over demonstrative expression in the Work and Income context. In contrast, during the focus groups when someone articulated something they would have liked to have said or done, but had refrained from doing so because of its inappropriateness, it raised the possibility that this could have occurred and often provoked much laughter from others in the group:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Kiri: So if you start asking questions [caseworkers will] ask clarification back, 'What do you mean?' And it's like, 'I don't know. [Laughter] Fucking tell me'. [Laughter]  
Yeah.
- Kiri: I can't read your mind. [Laughter]
- Hine: That's why I'm asking you. [Laughter]
- Kiri: You're the one who works here. [Laughter]
- Hine: They want a reaction eh? They want you to sit there and bow to them, like, 'Yes, please help me'.

### **Christchurch Group (5)**

- Sam: Yeah 'cause [caseworkers] are quite sour a lot of them are very, I've only come across a few nice ones, but I've had heaps of really bad experiences with them.
- Ayla: They need a fresh outlook. I've noticed a few people at the Work and Income building in [office name] have actually been there for the last 10 years. The guy I saw yesterday has been. And I was sitting there looking at him (once again I'm being judgemental). [Laughter] [I] sat there thinking, 'geez you really are getting a little pot belly aren't you? [Laughter] Has it really been that bad? [Laughs] Isn't it time for you to move on, maybe go to Inland Revenue'. [Laughter] So maybe that's an important outlook on life as well, you know, changing that job. They should change their jobs around to get some new fresh ones in.

Both of these examples are from discussions in which the women shared complaints about Work and Income caseworkers. In the first excerpt, Kiri begins by mentioning the unhelpfulness of Work and Income caseworkers who, in her experience, do not provide enough information to beneficiaries regarding entitlements. She comments that any requests for an explanation are often met with resistance from staff. Kiri and Hine then present examples of responses they would like to make on such occasions encouraged by the increasing laughter of others in the group. In the

second example the women are discussing how unpleasant the caseworkers are at Work and Income. Ayla then begins to poke fun at a caseworker's physical attributes. The man has gained weight during his employment at Work and Income. With comments that target both the individual caseworker and the institution, Ayla hints this is a symptom of discontent within the workplace and an indication that it is time for him to "move on".

The women's narratives are funny because they are absurd. Kiri and Hine would never speak so defiantly to a caseworker, and it seems unlikely that Ayla would tell a caseworker he had gained weight and suggest he look for work elsewhere. Joking, however, allows the women to imagine a reality in which they can deviate from established social expectations and act and speak in this way. It enables them to re-enact difficult interactions and voice the retorts they would have liked to have made at the time. In her narrative, Kiri, like a number of the women I interviewed, swears. Often when the women swore during the focus groups it was in the context of recreating a conversation they would have like to have had at Work and Income. Swearing was clearly considered to be a transgression of social norms in the context of Work and Income and appeared to have several functions in the dialogue. On the one hand it worked to stress the intensity of the women's feelings (Vingerhoets, 2013). Kiri's swearing, for example, emphasises her frustration at not getting the information she needs. The swearing is also, however, appropriate in the context of a humorous story. Swearing is funny (Vingerhoets, 2013) and Kiri, like a number of other women, appeared to use such language to increase the humour of the narrative. This is another form of incongruity referred to above; the contrast of coarse language with the politeness one should display during public social interactions.

Weems (2014, p.55) proposes that much of what constitutes humour is "inherently subversive". He argues that many jokes involve the mocking of serious subjects relying on offensive and disrespectful comments for humorous effect. Kuipers (2009, p.221) similarly contends that humour, "is always based on some sort of juxtaposition of mismatched elements ... often involv[ing] the transgression of social

norms or the breaking of established social patterns". The humour within the groups often hinged on the women imagining breaching standards of behaviour at Work and Income. Frequently it involved jokes in which participants fantasised about retaliating for example, burning down Work and Income offices as discussed in Chapter Three, or engaging in verbal interactions in which they gained the upper hand with caseworkers. In some places their humour involved things they wanted to do, but for the most part the women gave examples of things they would have liked to have said, but could not for fear of jeopardising their entitlements. On occasion women, like Ayla, targeted specific caseworkers. Some of the women assigned labels to caseworkers who they felt had treated them badly, calling them for example "KGB agents" and "bulldogs". After initially identifying them in this way, the women would then strategically reuse these monikers at various points during the discussion for humorous effect. Such "jocular abuse" (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p.82) – roleplaying responses, swearing, and abusive monikers – worked as rhetorical devices as the women used humour to re-enact their experiences for the other participants.

The dark and rebellious humour in these two examples relies on the juxtaposition between how the women have acted in reality, and the way they really want to respond. The justification for wanting to respond in this way is clear. Kiri implies that caseworkers at Work and Income have been deliberately obstructive on occasions when she has attempted to obtain information about her entitlements. Hine contends that caseworkers intentionally withhold information because they want clients to "bow to them". Sam emphasises how she's had "heaps of really bad experiences" with staff at Work and Income. Preceding Ayla's imagined taunting of her caseworker was a lengthy description of a difficult encounter with this person, in which she admitted; "he actually made me feel really stupid". Imagining flouting boundaries within Work and Income that require them to ignore these humiliations offered the women a way of transgressing these without repercussion. Furthermore, constructing their accounts humorously facilitated a reimagining of events without the narrator having to dwell on the unpleasant content of previous humiliating interactions.

### **Coping through humour**

A widely held view in relation to humorous laughter suggests that it serves as a way of coping in difficult situations. This perception of humour, proposed famously by Sigmund Freud (1905) in *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, describes laughter as an effective psychic defence: a way of coping with the pain of life. The value of humour in dealing with demanding situations has since been considered across a wide range of contexts from personal experiences of trauma, ill health and death, to those dealing with challenging working conditions or relationships (Lefcourt & Martin 1986; Mealyea, 1989; Sanders, 2004; Weems, 2014; Wilkinson, Rees & Knight, 2007).

Laughter's interpretation as a psychological coping strategy has arguably done much to promote humour as an appropriate way of dealing with difficult circumstances. Common idioms encouraging us to "laugh away" or "laugh off" problems constitute laughter as an effective means of managing unpleasant situations. Such expressions appeared throughout the focus groups. Many of the participants, like Desiree in the quotation opening this chapter, proposed that they should laugh off their problems. Accordingly, they often presented their accounts of hardship in a humorous way:

#### **Rural Group**

- Leah: [Work and Income] usually want you to follow up, be involved with budget advice before they'll help you out now, which is quite demoralising to my eyes.
- Piper: Yeah I find that really, really patronising ... [Laughs] it's like you see how you can make this stretch. I don't need budgeting advice, I need more money. [Laughter]

#### **Christchurch Group (6)**

- Charlene: I sort of don't really go in [to Work and Income] really, hardly ever, even like - ages ago I went in for a food grant and [was declined] I was just 'nah, sorry kids, we're having Weet-Bix and water tonight'//  
[Laughter]  
But I mean seriously I say 'oh no some people just can't drink milk. Often people have Weet-Bix and water'. [Laughs]

In both of these accounts the women are discussing Special Needs Grants. In the first example, the women refer to an obligation to attend budgeting sessions. As noted in Chapter Five, this is a Work and Income requirement when a beneficiary has received more than two Special Needs Grants in a 12-month period. Leah argues that she finds the need to attend such sessions “demoralising”. Piper agrees: it is “really patronising”. Piper then laughs, signalling she is about to make a joke, before quipping, “I don’t need budgeting advice, I need more money”. In the second excerpt, Charlene recounts having to feed her children breakfast cereal and water for dinner after running out of money to buy food and being declined additional assistance. Although this can be read as a tragic story, Charlene jokes about the way she attempted to ameliorate the situation for her children, telling them that it is actually a healthy option to have cereal with water because many people “just can’t drink milk”.

The joking in these accounts elicited significant amounts of laughter in the groups. The stories emphasise the difficulties the women face providing for their families on a limited budget. In the first account the group laughs as Piper mocks a system that sends women in poverty to budget advisors when what they really need is additional support. In the second example, the group laughter signals the women’s appreciation of Charlene’s creative response to Work and Income’s refusal of a Special Needs Grant. In these examples, as in many of the other group discussions, laughter appeared to mitigate the difficulty of talking about a distressing subject enabling the speaker to construct herself as coping against all odds.

### **Laughter and humour as a response to welfare provision**

The laughter provoked as the women constituted themselves as coping also seemed to serve another important function in the groups. The joking that occurred in the focus groups, away from Work and Income and its environment, processes and caseworkers, appeared to offer the women a way of critically reassessing their encounters there. The women frequently outlined absurdities in the administrative practices and policies of Work and Income exposing them to ridicule:

### **Māori Group (3)**

- Frances: I said to the receptionist lady once, 'can you just let me know about how long I have to wait?' They don't even have a time system or anything. So I said, 'Is it like an hour or two hours or more?'
- Danielle: Then they just give you the number of how many people are in front of you eh? They're just like, 'Oh well there's about five people in front of you'.
- Frances: Yeah and she goes 'No, you just wait, that's how it goes'. I said, 'I just wanna know so that I can either sort out someone to come pick up my daughter if it's more than two hours or I can wait for under an hour, she would probably be able to handle that'. She goes, 'Oh why don't you get someone to look after her?' I was like, 'Oh yeah 'cause I'm really gonna pay a baby sitter so I can come to WINZ to ask for money for food. [Laughter]. That's really practical'. [Laughter]

### **Christchurch Group (2)**

- Ana: There was a question on the online application. It said: 'Why did you break up? Why are you no longer with this person?' The next question was: 'How do you feel about it?' So, it was 'how do I feel about it?' I thought, 'I don't know why it's relevant and how they're gonna take my answer'. So I just put 'the normal range of expected emotional responses'. [Laughter]
- Ellie: That's very safe. [Laughter]
- Tania: Yeah, 'cause you can't say '[he] broke my heart I want to kill him'. They'd be like [sharp intake of breath] [Laughter]
- Ana: How do you think I feel, you stupid fuck? [Laughter]

In the first extract Danielle and Frances describe lengthy waits for appointments at Work and Income offices. Frances relates an exchange with a staff member where, instead of being given information about wait times, she is told to find a babysitter for her child. The humour in Frances's comment relies on the assumption that those listening will recognise the irrationality in the situation; the group laughter indicates that her quip has hit the mark. Frances is desperate for assistance. If she had money to pay a babysitter, she would not need to be at Work and Income applying for a Special Needs Grant.



In the second example, Ana describes encountering a question in an online application form that she felt to be overly intrusive. She shares her original answer with the group, an answer that amuses the others because it is in Ellie's words "very safe", answering the question without disclosing her feelings. Tania and Ana then begin role-playing answers they would have liked to have made. Ana's retort "how do you think I feel, you stupid fuck?" elicits a great deal of laughter from other women in the group. This is not an interaction that has happened. As in the examples from Kiri, Ayla and Frances above the retort is fictional. It seems unlikely that any of the women would feel comfortable saying these things directly to Work and Income staff. Instead the humour works as a subversive strategy allowing them to act out a response they would like to have made.

In relation to her research with women in the slums of Brazil, Goldstein (2013) argued that humour enabled women to laugh about subjects that often went unmentioned, and in this way it represented a form of insubordination. As in Goldstein's (2013) study, the laughter in the focus groups carried out for my own research seemed to encourage the women to talk freely about difficulties that in the context of the welfare offices often went unchallenged. Humour can enable people to disengage from the rules of everyday conversation and from standards that dictate our behaviour in social settings (Billig, 2005; Watson, 2015). In making fun of a situation there is no longer the need to be serious. The women were able to use humour to disengage from the necessity to speak politely; they could act out dialogues where they responded to caseworkers, telling them that they "needed more money" addressing them as "stupid fuck[s]" and threatening to burn down their offices. They could say things that were truly outrageous because they were only joking. The women may have had little influence over the practices at Work and Income, but they could reconstruct responses to these in a humorous way in order to ridicule them.

Feminist writers have drawn attention to the way that comedy relating to lived experience can encourage the critical examination of conditions that regulate and

control the lives of oppressed women (Gillooly, 1991; Merrill, 1988). Eileen Gillooly (1991) has argued that:

humor successfully weakens the dominant ideology by meticulously representing its contradictions and absurdities and, in so doing, exposes them to ridicule. (p.478)

Women in the focus groups often drew attention to inconsistent and incongruous practices experienced in their interactions with Work and Income. Their humour frequently ridiculed welfare administrative policy. In the examples above, the women are laughing at the incompetence of the system, and those who administer it, for failing to meet their basic needs despite being mandated to do so. The women's laughter appeared to be a response to their experiences in the Work and Income context, to their treatment by caseworkers, and to the administrative practices surrounding their pursuit of financial assistance. Participants erupted into laughter as those in authority were held up to ridicule. The joke could be as simple as laughing at a Work and Income process, or it could be the more complex form of humour that saw the women act out responses to those whose decisions impacted on their day-to-day lives. This rebellious humour, which Billig (2005, p.208) argues "can delight in taking the powerful as its target", inspired laughter shifting the women into a social space where they could readily discuss and challenge their shared experiences in the welfare context.

Several research projects examining the use of humour and laughter by sex workers have similarly considered humour as a response to power (Downe, 1999; Sanders, 2004). Teela Sanders (2004, p.286) interpreted the humorous recounting of experiences by the sex workers in her study as "a process of resisting the narrative of victimhood and defining their own identity as individuals who are in control and able to protect themselves". Humour has been recognised as particularly valuable in facilitating the reassessment of one's role in past events. Considering the examples noted in this chapter from such a perspective highlights how the women utilised humour in a similar way. Piper is not the poor budgeter Work and Income suggest

she is; she just “need[s] more money”. Ana may have had to endure intrusive questions about her past relationship, but in repeating the story she can include an angry retort to the Work and Income administration. Frances may have had to wait for an extended period with her baby daughter, but in her narrative she can contrast the receptionist’s lack of common sense with her own competence.

While humour has much to offer marginalised groups as a “form of resistance to power and inequality” (MacLure, Holmes, Jones, & MacRae, 2010, p.497), the response offered by humour in the focus groups, however, is complex. There seems to be little doubt that the women’s intention was disrupt the power relations they encountered during their interactions with Work and Income, however, such responses often also simultaneously appeared to reaffirm these relations:

### **Māori Group (1)**

Kiri

I went in the other day, ‘cause my childcare subsidy lapsed, and I said, ‘Do you need ID?’ and she was like, ‘We know who you are’. And it’s because I run conferences from their office now; I run family group conferences.<sup>53</sup> And I walk in that door and I think ‘judge me, judge me. Come at me. Judge me now’. ‘Cause I used to walk in there with my stories of ‘this is why I need some support’. Now I walk in there, I’m like, ‘judge me. Come on, come at me. Say something. Say something now. I know you’re thinking it so say it; say it. I’m going round the back and I’m allowed. [Laughter] Won’t you say something? I’ll see you in your staffroom. [Laughter] I’ll drink your coffee’. [Laughter]

Here Kiri is describing entering a Work and Income office having begun part-time work as a facilitator of Ministry of Social Development family group conferences. She is now both a client and an employee of Work and Income and she constructs her very presence in the offices as a form of resistance. In her account she dares the staff to “judge me ... say something” and while the group laughter that runs through the account appears to support the challenge she has laid down, the performance of

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<sup>53</sup> A *family group conference* (FGC) is a mediated meeting between family members and other officials such as social workers and police in relation to either, the care and protection of a child, or the criminal offending of a child or young person.

this challenge and the laughter it evokes emphasises the hierarchies that separate her from the staff at Work and Income. While Kiri may insist that she is “allowed” to use the Work and Income staff spaces, her use of humour in daring staff members to “say something”, coupled with her repetition of the pronoun “your” in relation to the staffroom and the coffee, reinforces the distance that exists between her and other employees while she continues to receive a benefit.

Many of the examples of humour in the focus groups similarly illustrated that, while participants may have experienced their humour as defiance, situations that provoked humour served to reinforce the relations of power that shaped their interactions with Work and Income:

### **Christchurch Group (2)**

- Tania: It would be very nice when you apply if they could tell you what you’re entitled to.
- Ellie: Yeah
- Tania: Given your circumstances. I know they’re not going to [Laughter] but that would be nice ‘cause it saves you getting down the track and someone mentioning it along the line. You’re like, ‘oh well, really? I didn’t know about that’ or ‘I didn’t know about this’. And they go, ‘well, you should have been [told]’ ... ‘Well, you should have known. Someone should have told you’.
- Ellie: Yeah, just a bit more informative.
- Ana: Yeah, a wee bit of information about how they work.
- Ellie: Just basic stuff really.
- Ana: Like anything to do with childcare subsidies is processed over in the Papanui office.
- Ellie: Yeah, that would be great.
- Ana: So when you bring your stuff to us and we take three weeks to send it on, just take it to them. [Laughter]
- Ellie: Yeah, that would be great. [Laughter] Yeah that would be. [Laughter]
- Ana: Which is what I did in the end. [Laughter] I guess you don’t know how a different organisation, the ins and outs of how they work and where different things are held.
- Tania: Sorry, I’m not laughing at you I’ve done exactly the same thing [Laughter]
- Ana: Have you? [Laughs]

- Tania: [My daughter] needed an OSCAR<sup>54</sup> subsidy in the holidays. So I still had Uni but she still needs somewhere to go. And I sent it there and they lost it. 'Oh, it could be in the mail between here and Papanui'. 'In Christchurch Papanui?' [Laughter] And she's like 'Yes'. [I said] 'Can you just print another form? Oh, I'll take it. I'll do it. I live over there'. And she's, 'Oh okay then'. Three days later got a letter back. I was like 'score'.
- Ana: Yeah, I needed to make a change to my form and they're like, 'Right, we can scan it and send it off from here'. 'Oh no, no, I'll just take it to the Papanui office'. [Laughter]
- Ellie: Yeah, I'll do it give it here. [Laughs]

In this example the women are discussing what would be helpful in their dealings with Work and Income. They reiterate a common complaint from the focus groups that they are not fully informed about their entitlements. The women joke about the ineptitude of administration processes. Ana relates her discovery that in Christchurch only one office administers applications for childcare subsidies. This means that applications received in any other office in Christchurch have to be sent to the Papanui office for processing. Both Ana and Tania have had problems in the past with lost paperwork causing delays in their applications and have found that by taking the documentation directly to the Papanui office, they can circumvent the problem. In this example the women appear to delight in mocking the inefficient processes of the Work and Income administrative system. Their efforts to bypass the system in order to get the result they require is appreciated within the group. The women's commentary on the incompetence of Work and Income is funny, as are accounts of how they managed this incompetence. Yet, as emerged during the discussion, bypassing the standard administrative delays placed additional demands on the women's time and resources.

Billig (2005) points out that:

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<sup>54</sup> *Out of School Care and Recreation (OSCAR)* Subsidy is a payment that helps families with the costs of before-school, after-school, and school holiday programmes.

at times, rebellious humour – or humour that is claimed and experienced as rebellious – can have conservative and disciplinary functions. Far from subverting the serious world of power, the humour can strengthen it (p.212)

Tania, Ellie, and Ana may be mocking Work and Income for its administrative inefficiency, but their resolution of the problem appears to illustrate Billig's (2005) argument. The women's actions come at a cost to them, and the laughter within the group indicates acceptance of the power differential inherent in such actions, confirming the borders they initially appear to transgress (Franzén & Aronsson, 2013). Considering the women's responses from this perspective highlights the complexity of rebellious humour. The women's humour often appeared to simultaneously conform to and subvert relations of power: the laughter both challenged and normalised the inefficiency of the organisation.

### **Laughter and transformation**

While the responses presented by laughter and humour are complex, considering the women's laughter as affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) offers another way of conceptualising its function in the groups. In highlighting laughter's capacity to reposition the women so that they could look at themselves in a different light, I consider the capacity of laughter to offer emotional transformation. Each of the excerpts above is grounded in a distressing experience that appeared to be emotionally challenging for the narrator. There are a number of emotions implicated in these experiences. At various points in the focus groups, the women spoke about feeling shame, frustration, and anger as they were declined Special Needs Grants; compelled to answer intrusive questions; made to wait for extended periods of time, and/or forced to contend with administrative practices that placed demands on their time and energy. Immediately prior to Ana's account, she outlined how she became tearful during a Work and Income meeting, and described shame and anxiety accompanying these tears. Frances and Danielle similarly recounted feeling demeaned and belittled during meetings at Work and Income that resulted in them leaving the office crying. Kiri spoke of previous difficult interactions with staff members that had left her feeling "so pissed off".

The laughter in the accounts, however, appears to disrupt these negative emotions, as it shifts the tone of the narrative. This is what Graefer (2014, p.112) refers to as the “transformative power of laughter”: laughter’s capacity for showing a different way of feeling as the negative is re-engaged with in a humorous way. This is not simply a repositioning of roles in the narrative, as some researchers have suggested (e.g. Downe, 1999; Sanders, 2004), but a shift in emotion in relation to these roles. Laughter can be destabilising. It moves people physically and emotionally, offering the possibility of new ways of being, as it reorients them in relation to the object of their laughter (Bruns, 2000; Graefer, 2014). In extending Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the affective quality of laughter, Graefer (2014, p.112) argues; “laughter makes sensate that we are affected by what we have encountered, and sometimes such affective encounters can enable new ways of knowing and feeling”. Considering the women’s laughter from this perspective emphasises its transformative potential in relation to the way participants felt about particularly difficult encounters at Work and Income.

### **Laughter, humour and group cohesion**

As I have emphasised in previous chapters affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) is relational and is often co-created by different participants in an interaction. The focus group context, and the interaction that took place within the groups, was significant in my analysis. The affective transformation that took place in the focus groups involved many of the participants, their social histories, and their experiences within the welfare environment. As is clear from the examples provided above, to appreciate humour one needs to have some knowledge of a specific social situation; the interpretation of humour often relies upon a shared understanding of that context (Kuipers, 2009). From a feminist perspective, Gillooly (1991) notes that when oppressed groups utilise humour it:

is frequently coded for a specific marginalized audience, which is assumed to share the ... narrator's familiarity with her subject ... as well as the resentment that subject arouses in her. However amusing such humor may

sometimes be to those outside the targeted audience, it has special collusive import for those whose cultural experience resembles that of the ... narrator. (p.482)

The mutual understanding of the women in the groups was often crucial to the humour and it was frequently signalled through laughter.

An understanding of laughter as increasing group cohesion is well established in the literature (Hay, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Kuipers, 2009; Sanders, 2004; Tyler, 2008; Wilkinson, Rees & Knight, 2007). Imogen Tyler (2008, p.23) proposes that laughter is “community-forming”. Because there is an object to laughter, it often works to create boundaries between that object and those who find the joke amusing. Laughing *with* others, or by coming together to laugh *at* other people can reinforce these boundaries and draw those inside the group closer together. Laughter as a form of othering was evident in the focus groups as the women laughed at humour targeting staff and practices at Work and Income:

### **Māori Group (1)**

Kiri: She [caseworker] was just being really cold and horrible to me until I started like, ‘okay, just play this game. Just play it; play it, play it, play it’. So I was like, ‘I really like your jacket. [Laughter] Is that Kathmandu?’ She’s like, ‘Macpac’ I’m like, ‘Oh yeah, they’re really good. I’ve been thinking about getting one but I just wanna prioritise things at the moment, get myself a job. [Laughter] I’m just so looking forward to not being on a benefit and just being so independent’. And she’s like, ‘Okay, we’ll get this processed right away’. [Laughter] I’m like, ‘Frigging process that. Put a bow on it’. [Laughter]

### **Christchurch Group (5)**

Veronique: The [caseworker] felt terrible afterwards, ‘cause she was asking about the fathers of my children and I said, ‘Oh there’s three different fathers’, and the look on her face, her mouth dropped wide open and I said, ‘They have the same parents, though’. [Laughter] She looked at me again and I said, ‘All three children come from donors, I’m in a same-sex relationship’, and she was just like, ‘Oh, oh’ [Laughter]. But she just, you know, the //[Laughter]

Lydia: She was judging you for sleeping//



Veronique: //Yeah the judgment. 'People like you are on benefits'. You could see the look, like you know. And then when I added that they actually had the same parents, it was a bit different. It all of a sudden changed. I thought, 'that's really interesting'.

In the first narrative, Kiri recounts an interaction with a caseworker who had a “cold and horrible” manner. Although not clearly stated, the implication is that the caseworker’s attitude is a result of her reliance upon the ideological motif of the welfare mother who prefers life on welfare to paid employment. Kiri relates a conscious decision to exploit this by pretending to “play the game”. The “game” involves referencing the symbolic welfare mother while distancing herself from her in order to obtain assistance. The rest of the group appear to recognise what Kiri is doing, seemingly finding her manipulation of the caseworker hilarious.

In the second example, Veronique appears to deliberately challenge the label of the promiscuous mother on a benefit having children to different men by not immediately disclosing that her three children were born to donor fathers while she was in a stable relationship. Through satirising this label she similarly mocks a Work and Income staff member who “was judging you”. Many of the women acknowledged the stereotypes surrounding beneficiaries. They noted that it was common for conversations to arise in which lone mothers were vilified for their dependence on welfare, and/ or assumed to have questionable morals. Kiri’s and Veronique’s accounts are amusing for other focus group members because they utilise familiar categorisations of welfare mothers as lazy and promiscuous in unexpected ways, and in the process mock those who rely on these labels. The women’s humorous representations of such interactions made staff at Work and Income the butt of the joke and the ensuing laughter drew the groups closer together.

The appreciation of others in the groups was paramount to this process. The laughter of the other participants not only represented “collusive import” as Gillooly (1991) has suggested, but also appeared to offer a form of collusive *input* and played a key role in the alteration of negative affect. On a number of occasions the laughter

of other women in the group appeared to encourage the narrator to develop her description of events:

#### **Christchurch Group (5)**

- Veronique: I felt like I had to justify myself right from the start. Like the first point of application was I've got to justify everything I do. Right down to, 'how big is the couch?'
- Claire: They asked you how big the couch was that you were sleeping on?
- Veronique: Yeah yeah yeah. I don't know I don't normally sleep on a couch so//
- Lydia: So they have no idea that it was their fault that you're on the couch because you couldn't get a benefit because [Laughter]
- Veronique: //Exactly, yeah. No idea. I'm guessing maybe if it's a bigger, comfortable couch, I could stay for longer [Laughter]

#### **Christchurch Group (4)**

- Brooke: I think it's frustrating when they just send you a letter with like a date and a time and you're expected to be able to go, like you don't have a life and you don't have anything going on. ... I got [a letter] two weeks before my appointment, so I rung, 'cause I was on [student] placement and couldn't go at that time, to change it and they were like, 'Oh, no you can't ring in till a week before to change it'. [Laughter]
- Trudy: What?
- Brooke: [Laughs] It was really bizarre, I was like, 'But I can change it now. I know that I definitely am not gonna be able to make it then'. But no, it has to be within a week [Laughter] of the appointment and I was like, 'this is ridiculous'. [Laughs] So I had to write it in my diary [Laughs] to remember to call them to change [Laughs] like a week later. [Laughter]
- Stephanie: It takes so long to get through to them as well. [Laughter] What a hassle.

In the first excerpt, Veronique relates a recent experience in a Work and Income office. She, like a number of participants, recounted struggling to leave a relationship because of a lack of financial resources, eventually moving out of the family home and on to a friend's couch. Her story begins seriously as she outlines the difficulty that she had convincing a caseworker of her situation. She is interrupted, first by me and then by Lydia, and finally by laughter from the remaining members in the focus

group. Veronique then appears to relax into her story flippantly suggesting that, in questioning the size of the couch, her caseworker may have been assessing its suitability as a longer-term accommodation option. In the second account Brooke questions a Work and Income directive that she wait until a week prior to a scheduled appointment before changing it. Her tone is mildly critical at the beginning of her account, she finds it “frustrating”, but buoyed by the supportive laughter from the group, Brooke increases her level of reproach: the situation was “really bizarre” and “ridiculous”. Group laughter indicates consensus (Adelswärd, 1989; Sanders 2004) and, with the support of the group, both Veronique and Brooke develop their stories to highlight the absurdity of the original encounters.

### **Laughter as “affective solidarity”**

Graefer (2014) proposes that the affective potential of laughter lies in its capacity to capture our attention moving us both physically and emotionally. “Laughter”, she argues, “... can turn bodies towards each other and draw them close” (Graefer, 2014, p.112). In my analysis I considered laughter as a process of reorientation that engaged the emotions of the participants as it established what Graefer (2014, p.118) refers to as a sense of “affective solidarity”:

### **Christchurch Group (6)**

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Julie:  | On Wednesday I’m gonna be on that side of town so I can go to Pak’nSave for that [discount]. Oh hang on now I’ve run out of milk because nobody had milk on special, what do I do?   |
| Erin:   | The Mad Butcher did this week for a dollar [Laughs] so that’s what you’re always thinking about.   |
| Rachel: | That’s so funny because I’ve listened to everybody and I’m actually smiling to myself. I’m not laughing at anybody. Because all of my friends are all married or in a relationship, they’ve got children and I don’t actually ... know many people that are in the same situation as me. So it’s quite interesting, everything that you’re saying I think to myself ‘I do that too, I do that too’. [Laughter] No one else understood so it’s quite interesting. |

### Christchurch Group (5)

- Lydia: We need to all get together, buy a big piece of land. We all move to it; we have our own houses, we have community gardens, community Playcentre<sup>55</sup> ...
- Veronique: [Laughter] If we all get some caravans around [city location] area ... Yeah, there's heaps of land over there. [Laughter]
- Lydia: I'm in.
- Annie: We just [need to] have a container that does coffee.<sup>56</sup>
- Veronique: Oh, that's okay; I've got a friend that has one of those coffee carts. He could probably bring that along. [Laughter]
- Annie: Oh that's good, just park that up. As long as there's a coffee place handy. [Laughter]

In the first excerpt the women talk about the complexity that poverty has added to their lives as they struggle to manage financially on welfare. As Erin notes “that’s what you’re always thinking about”. Rachel, who had previously contributed little to the conversation, began smiling in response to comments from the other women. Laughter, as Graefer (2014, p.112) points out, has the capacity to “grab” people. Rachel has found commonalities with the group and she relates thinking, “I do that too, I do that too”. Rachel’s proposed laughter, “that’s so funny”, signals her shift in perspective. Her actual laughter, accompanied by the other women, affirms the unity within the group. In the second excerpt, the women jokingly talk about solving their financial problems by living together. Veronique and Lydia suggest the women pool their resources, buy some land and raise their children communally. The group laughter can be read as a reaction to this unexpected turn of events, and as a way of encouraging the sudden reduction in social distance. The other women in the group laugh at the suggestion, neither accepting nor declining the invitation but using the laughter to keep the possibility alive.

Laughter’s capacity to capture the women’s attention and shift their perspective made it particularly powerful within the group context. The transformation in feeling was facilitated not simply by the narrator’s joke, but by the laughter that erupted in

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<sup>55</sup> *Playcentre* is a New Zealand parent-led early childhood education service.

<sup>56</sup> After the 2011 Canterbury earthquake shipping containers were often fitted out as retail premises to form temporary shops.

response. As the examples throughout this chapter demonstrate, it was the group laughter that often encouraged the narrator to constitute Work and Income staff and processes in new and unexpected ways, making her audience laugh even more. This laughter appeared to make the women feel better about a situation or an encounter that they had previously found upsetting or stressful. Laughter, it seems, transformed the way that many of the women made sense of their experiences, repositioning them in relation to other participants, to the focus group narratives, and to the affective potential of the situation. As the groups came together to gleefully challenge many of processes and practices they regularly encountered in the negotiation of their welfare entitlements, they often seemed to feel differently about these experiences.

Laughter and humour have long been considered as a means of contesting relations of power (Billig, 2005; Freud, 1928; Gillooly, 1991; Goldstein, 2013; Merrill, 1998). In approaching laughter as affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) my analysis extends this understanding. By focusing attention on laughter's intensity and its capacity to capture participants' interest, this chapter has emphasised the transformative potential of laughter. My analytical focus on laughter considers the way that it enabled research participants to contest practices that they found challenging at Work and Income, as it moved them into a space dominated by feeling and reaction. I propose that the positive affect generated by laughter enabled participants to see Work and Income, and more importantly themselves, from a different perspective.

## **Conclusion**

Emotions, as Ahmed (2014) reminds us, do things. Above all they move us. Waves of shared laughter often seemed to "grab" the attention of participants within the focus groups, repositioning them and enabling new ways of feeling (Wetherell, 2012, p.140). This chapter has highlighted the way that joking about experiences at Work and Income – outside of this context – worked to shift the negative affect that marked many of the women's accounts of these experiences. Wetherell (2012) proposes that in telling a story, moments of strong affect can be carried forward

from one situation to another. Certainly there was much negative feeling that was conveyed from the women's interactions at Work and Income into the focus groups. This chapter has demonstrated that there was also much positive affect generated by communal laughter that seemed to shift the atmosphere within the groups.<sup>57</sup>

Laughter and humour served a number of purposes in the focus groups. Laughter signified understanding amongst the women. Laughter and humour worked to engage participants in the conversation, drawing them closer together and, in the process, transforming many of the women's narratives. The humorous retelling of distressing events encouraged the participants to consider such events in a different light. Through the ensuing laughter, the women gained a fresh view of Work and Income: situations, practices and caseworkers began to appear ridiculous, making participants laugh even more. This transformative process offered a way of destabilising the authority of the organisation and its staff over the women's everyday lives. In joking about shared experiences away from Work and Income, the women could mock the organisation, its people, and its processes without fear of retribution. In the humorous retelling of the narratives – and the subsequent laughter the narratives provoked – the women gained a respite from the inevitability of their interactions at Work and Income.

The intention in this chapter has been to offer an explanation for the humour and laughter that featured throughout the focus groups. Humour and laughter were notable features of sections of cooperatively constructed discourse, creating group cohesion and triggering the recounting of similar stories from others in the group. My analysis has synthesised an interpretation of humour as a constitution of coping alongside a focus on laughter as movement and transformation. Laughing together provided the women with some relief, establishing a sense of closeness with others as they made sense of their experiences. It offered the women a new way of representing challenging situations, in the process opening up a space where they

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<sup>57</sup> How long this positive affect lasted is uncertain. An engagement with the medium or long-term impact of this feeling was beyond the scope of this research but, as I note in Chapter Nine, this is something that could be assessed in future projects.

could share difficult or embarrassing incidents with others who were often complete strangers. Humour and laughter introduced an air of playfulness into what were often distressing narratives. This appeared to be both cathartic and energising, offering the women a new perspective of the limiting practices that dominated their experience of claiming welfare, and ultimately a new way of feeling about themselves.

## **“You’re so like whakamā”: Welfare receipt for Māori and Pasifika women**

You feel so embarrassed and it’s like whakaiti,<sup>58</sup> you’re so like whakamā<sup>59</sup> ... no, I don’t wanna go back there. (Jessie, Māori Focus Group (1))

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Māori and Pasifika women who took part in the research.<sup>60</sup> As noted in Chapter Three, Māori and Pasifika people make up a significant proportion of lone mothers who receive welfare (Ministry of Social Development, 2017).<sup>61</sup> For this reason I made the decision to interview women from these population groups in order to engage with the way that ethnicity might shape participants’ experiences of welfare receipt. Within this chapter I draw attention to patterns of emotion relating to inequality developing the argument made in Chapter Four to include the way that Māori and Pasifika women negotiated their “person

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<sup>58</sup> *Whakaiti* has two parts to it. The first relates to being humble and self-disciplined. The other aspect is the way Jessie uses the term. It relates to *Whakamā* and refers to belittling or humiliating someone. One outcome of *whakaiti* is a loss of confidence (Ministry of Justice, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> *Whakamā* relates to the feelings of embarrassment and shame (Ministry of Justice, 2001; Moorfield, 2005). It can occur at an individual or a group level. When an individual is *Whakamā* they feel conscious that they have transgressed community values. The subsequent feelings have been described as extremely powerful and emotional (Ministry of Justice, 2001).

<sup>60</sup> This chapter was presented to members of the cultural steering group for review and feedback.

<sup>61</sup> To give some context to this chapter Māori and Pasifika people have lower workforce participation than Pākehā, and poverty rates are around double (Marriott & Sim, 2015). A Ministry of Health report released in 2015 found that 12.4% of Māori described experiencing unfair treatment in the areas of health care, housing or work between 2011 and 2012, compared to 4.2% of non-Māori (Ministry of Health, 2015). This finding aligns with an earlier Statistics New Zealand report that found nearly 10% of Māori and Pasifika people reported experiencing racial discrimination in the previous 12 months (Statistics New Zealand, 2012).



value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011) in the affective economy of welfare. In this chapter, I propose that ethnicity can magnify and compound the negative affect associated with welfare receipt.

This chapter opened with Jessie’s assertion that welfare receipt makes her “whakamā”. While I do not focus specifically on cultural differences in relation to feeling or expressing emotion, I begin the chapter with a discussion of emotional formations within Māori and Pasifika cultures. I do not intend to suggest that there are fixed ways in which Māori and Pasifika people understand emotion or emotionally charged situations, but rather that the meaning of emotion may shift in different cultural contexts. As Barnes et al. (2017) have demonstrated in their discussion of *wairua*<sup>62</sup> in Māori culture, paying attention to such difference can offer a way of appreciating that Māori and Pasifika people may make meaning outside dominant emotional practices in New Zealand society.

While engaging with emotional formations associated with Māori and Pasifika people provides context to this chapter, the bulk of my analysis focuses on the way participants attempted to negotiate “person value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011) in the Work and Income environment. I consider the emotion work the women had to perform in order to simultaneously deal with their status as beneficiaries and the racism they related experiencing at Work and Income. I consider the women’s discussions of feeling out of place in the Work and Income environment, and their sense of being devalued and disadvantaged by treatment in this context. These themes resonated throughout the other focus groups however Māori and Pasifika women often argued that ethnicity shaped their visits to Work and Income. While the chapter highlights that the participants did not experience their ethnicity as a static identity, I argue that identifying as Māori or Pasifika appears to have negative affective value in the New Zealand welfare context, and implications in relation to accessing entitlements.

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<sup>62</sup> Barnes et al. (2017) define *wairua* as spirit or spirituality. *Wairua* infuses all Māori values (Ministry of Justice, 2001).

### **Emotion in Māori and Pasifika culture**

The title of this chapter introduces *whakamā*, the word used by Jessie at the beginning of this chapter to express how she feels about her visits to Work and Income offices. Often translated into English as shame (Al-Issa, & Tousignant, 1997; Eriksson & Wallace, 2006; Taitimu, 2008), and argued to be a central emotion in Māori culture (Addo & Besnier; Metge, 1986; Scheff 1995; 2003; Suaalii, & Mavoa, 2001), *whakamā* has been described as a way of thinking about interpersonal relationships (Metge, 1986). It refers to a range of emotions that fit within English definitions of shame but also includes shyness, embarrassment, inadequacy and fear (Metge, 1986; Scheff, 2003). Metge (1986) argues that *whakamā* can include anger. Banks (1996) proposes that what makes *whakamā* particularly unique for Māori are the patterns of emotions that it encompasses. While of course non-Māori can experience the same emotions, it is the way these feelings coalesce that distinguishes *whakamā*.

*Whakamā* is often used in the way Jessie uses it above: to refer to strong feelings concerning one's performance in a social situation and in particular in relation to the anxiety (Sachdev, 1990), powerlessness and unfamiliarity associated with this performance (Taitimu, 2008). It expresses states that are socially grounded and experienced where there is an awareness of discrepancy in status; when an individual feels unsure or confused; when one's flaws or mistakes are pointed out; when one is singled out for attention; or on behalf of others (Banks, 1996; Metge, 1986). A common explanation is that being *whakamā* involves feeling at some disadvantage in relation to another, or empathising with someone who is disadvantaged (Banks, 1996). Jessie was the only person in the groups to announce herself as *whakamā*, however, its broad definition appears to encompass much of the emotion described by women in the Māori interviews. Participants talked about feeling, embarrassed, inadequate, confused, and anxious in the welfare context.

While many Māori and Pasifika women engage with dominant emotional perspectives in New Zealand society, they may also draw on other traditions informed by different understandings of emotion and relationality (Wetherell et al.,

2015). Like many of the Māori participants, three of the Pasifika women spoke frequently of feeling embarrassed, shy, uncertain, and frightened in interactions with Work and Income. These feelings seemed to be anchored in an anxiety about the responses of their caseworkers. An important principle in relation to Samoan culture is that of establishing and preserving harmonious relationships (Pasifika Advisory Group, 2012). When relationships are not amicable – such as relationships with caseworkers at Work and Income – there is a concern about how one will be perceived. Culturally for many Samoan and Tongan people<sup>63</sup> (and for other Pasifika groups) it is important to operate in a way that will enhance, or at least uphold the reputation of the family and the local community (Suaalii, & Mavoa, 2001). Kalavite (2010) writes that, from a Tongan perspective, many people understand themselves in relation to their extended family and local community. Feelings of anxiety in relation to damaging this reputation can be intensified by the shame this brings not only on oneself but also to one's social networks.

### **Do your Pākehā friends have the same stories?**

As noted in Chapter Three, my intention in running groups with Māori and Pasifika women was to engage with the similarities and differences pertaining to the lived experience of welfare amongst women of different ethnicities. Prior to the focus groups Moana-o-Hinerangi, the facilitator of the Māori groups, and I discussed how best to draw out any differences. We decided that we would include a question to encourage Māori women to talk about their experiences of being Māori in the welfare environment. This question manifested itself in the focus groups as “so do your Pākehā friends have the same stories?” or “are there differences between Māori stories and non-Māori stories?”

Many of the Māori women were adamant that there were significant differences between their experiences and those of the Pākehā welfare recipients they knew:

#### **Māori Group (1)**

Moana:            So do your Pākehā friends have the same stories?

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<sup>63</sup> The women making up the Pasifika groups identified as Samoan or Tongan (Appendix 6).

Hine: Nah.  
 Moana: Really?  
 Hine: My Pākehā friends get everything. They come up to me and they//  
 Caitlin: My Pākehā friends//  
 ...  
 Hine: // they were the ones that told me what I was entitled to. Yeah.  
 Hine: One of my friends who got pregnant at 14 and she was in a really violent relationship at 14. She was a big inspiration for me 'cause she's now at university. But she was the one that really helped me out with what we're entitled to and stuff like that. She's Pākehā and she went in [to Work and income] first time – her dad owns a business – and she went in there first time and she got all this money and all these grants and everything.  
 Wow.  
 Yeah.  
 Hine: I was thinking like//  
 Kiri: We go in there for the bare like//  
 Hine: Yeah, I go in there for//  
 Kiri: Like just wanna get on the first step.  
 Hine: It's like I'm begging for a hundred bucks will do me; just something.  
 Caitlin: It really annoyed me because I've got a Pākehā ex-friend ... She was only two months pregnant. They put her straight on a benefit and she was working. I was like, okay. It's just like where is the decency in this? She's working. They're like, 'Oh, we just pay the difference of what she doesn't make', and that's what she was telling me that they do. So she works and they top her up; they give her a top up. I was like, oh, okay. I wonder if I can do that, but I got denied. They're like, 'You work enough hours'. I was like, 'Oh yeah, 25 hours. That's heaps'. She's like, 'Oh, sweet as'. ... I feel like they treat us, Māori/Pasifika Islanders, different to Pākehā to be honest. I'm not trying to... but I feel like there's a division there.  
 Yeah.  
 Caitlin: They look at us differently I feel.

### **Māori Group (3)**

Danielle: I've got a friend, who is on benefit with her kids, she's Pākehā and she's had no problems for the whole four years she's been on the benefit. Everything she asks for she gets. Every time she needs food grants she gets it and she's never been turned down for anything. Then when I talk to my Māori mates it's so different, they're like, 'bro they turned me down. I've got to go

to Sallies<sup>64</sup> and get a food grant' and all this stuff, but she's never had that problem, ever and she's been on it for four years. Her caseworker is Pākehā too ... Actually I can say [my caseworker] is a Māori, ... and he's amazing to me whereas every other one I had wasn't a Māori and they weren't very nice.

The women in the first excerpt react animatedly when asked about the differences between them and their Pākehā friends. They all have stories to tell as they interrupt and speak over one another in their enthusiasm to share. Hine's Pākehā friends "get everything" they ask for while she's "begging for a hundred bucks". Similarly Caitlin describes a Pākehā friend who was given a "top up" from Work and Income when working part-time, while she was declined assistance in the same situation.

Elsewhere in the focus group Caitlin also spoke about her struggle to get assistance from Work and Income when she was unemployed and five months pregnant. Her Pākehā friend, however, was put "straight on a benefit" when she was two months pregnant and working part-time. In the second excerpt Danielle is also very irate. Her Pākehā friend has never had any problems with Work and Income: "everything she asks for she gets". In contrast, her Māori friends are often declined in their applications for Special Needs Grants.

These accounts are filled with anger at the injustice that the women claim to have regularly experienced. A number of women in the Māori groups, like Danielle, maintained that they were treated badly by Pākehā caseworkers and juxtaposed this with treatment by staff who were Māori. These women spoke about seeking out Māori or Pasifika caseworkers claiming that only then could they be sure that they would be treated fairly. The problem was, however, that the majority of caseworkers they encountered were Pākehā. There were financial implications to this: Pākehā caseworkers, it seems, not only "look at us differently", but according to the women's accounts were less inclined to approve requests for additional assistance.

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<sup>64</sup> *Sallies* refers to a food bank run by the Salvation Army.

## Being Māori in a Pākehā environment

During the discussions, the women proposed that the disadvantage they outlined was not simply the bias of individual Pākehā caseworkers, but was representative of the wider welfare environment. This was an environment that they experienced as being dominated by Pākehā values and norms:

### Māori Group (1)

- Kiri: Yeah. I've had friends that have worked there and still work there, and some will mihi<sup>65</sup> to you across the office and they'll be like, 'Hey, come over here'. That would be so normal in any other setting but in that setting it's like I feel like I'm gonna get you fired. They're gonna cut my benefit. If I come and sit next to you they're gonna think that we're scheming something together or something like that. But it's so sad when you see your mates that work there and you can't really//
- Hine: You don't feel like it's okay.
- Kiri: //You don't feel like it's okay to acknowledge one another. I'll be lucky if I get a [nod] from one of the people that I know that work there which sucks because out in the community it will be, 'Oh, hey bro, how's kids', all that kind of thing. And they're not sitting there with a client; they're just sitting there typing. But it's like this unspoken rule that we don't know each other. We don't whakawhanaungatanga.<sup>66</sup> We don't do what's normal for our culture. When we're inside those doors we keep our culture outside. And then when we come back out you can put your culture back on.

### Māori Group (3)

- Frances ... that whole thing about no eating in there, they expect you to wait for hours and you're not allowed to eat. There's nowhere to get water unless you go into the toilet and ask them for a cup and then get your water from the tap. Like I've gone in with my son's water bottle and he's drunk it empty and then I've gone, 'Can I get some water?' They're like, 'Oh there's some tap water in the bathroom'. And I'm like, 'Yo I'm Māori, we don't drink or eat anything that comes out a bathroom'.<sup>67</sup> They don't have understanding of any of that.

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<sup>65</sup> To *mihi* someone is to greet them (Moorfield, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> *Whakawhanaungatanga* translates as a process of establishing relationships with others (Moorfield, 2005).

<sup>67</sup> Māori tikanga (culture) notes that anything that comes into contact with the body or body fluids must be kept separate from food or drink ("Nau Mai", 2008).

In the first excerpt Kiri talks about encountering friends employed at Work and Income. She comments that under normal circumstances she would greet them and spend time talking, but in that context she feels it is inappropriate. She is afraid that there will be repercussions in emphasising her ethnicity; “they’re gonna think that we’re scheming something together”. Despite knowing Māori people employed by Work and Income it is clear that Kiri and Hine experience it as a Pākehā institution. The environment supports Pākehā cultural mores, encouraging certain ways of acting while discouraging others; “it’s like this unspoken rule that we don’t know each other”, and as a result “we keep our culture outside”. In the second example, Frances echoes comments made in many of the other focus groups about long waits without food and water for the children. This is exacerbated for her by the fact that she feels drinking or eating in a bathroom violates her cultural values. Yet the staff (by implication Pākehā) at Work income “don’t have understanding of any of that”. As in Kiri’s account, Frances’s Māori culture has no place in the welfare setting.

The Ministry of Social Development, like other New Zealand government departments, has made attempts to incorporate aspects of Māori culture into its spaces. Its website and the exterior of Work and Income buildings announces the institution’s Māori name. Documents and signage within the offices commonly utilise Māori words and concepts. It is possible to speak to a staff member on the telephone in Māori by using the multilingual line. Efforts to demonstrate biculturalism were largely brought about in response to *Puao te Ata tu* (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1986) a report condemning monoculturalism within what was then the Department of Social Welfare (now the Ministry of Social Development). This report has been described as "arguably the most significant ... concerning welfare issues and the needs of Māori" (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999 p.36). The report’s authors asserted that institutional racism within the department limited its ability to meet the needs of Māori clients. One of the report’s key recommendations was that the department begin “incorporating the values, cultures and beliefs of the Māori people in all

policies developed” (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1986, p.9).

While one of the focus groups acknowledged efforts towards biculturalism, such as Māori signage and Māori and Samoan Language Weeks,<sup>68</sup> these were derided as insincere:

**Māori Group (1)**

- Kiri: But I bet when it comes to Māori Language week or Samoan language week [staff at Work and Income] are all up in their brown colleague’s faces like//
- Caitlin: Kia ora.<sup>69</sup>  
[Laughter]
- Kiri: // Talofa.<sup>70</sup> Thank you for your karakia.<sup>71</sup> It really touched my heart. Just love our Māori people.
- ...
- Kiri: What’s a crack up is on the outside of the building it’s got: He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. What is the most important thing of this world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people. Aaa [Laughter] Lies.
- Hine: Do you know what that means on your front [door]?  
[Laughter]

Smith (2012, p.89) has critiqued a practice she has termed “trading the Other” in which indigenous culture is appropriated with “no concern for the peoples who originally produced the ideas or images”. The women’s contempt for what they perceive to be a superficial engagement with Māori and Pasifika cultures aligns with this critique. The Ministry of Social Development may endorse Māori and Samoan Language Weeks, but the women scorn the perfunctory attention paid to their cultures. Work and Income may have utilised a Māori proverb emphasising the

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<sup>68</sup> See Footnote 24, Chapter Three.

<sup>69</sup> See Footnote 25, Chapter Three.

<sup>70</sup> See Footnote 26, Chapter Three.

<sup>71</sup> See Footnote 27, Chapter Three.



worth of people on the outside of a building, but according to Kiri it is insincere, and Hine questions whether the Ministry even understands the meaning of the sign.

These comments emphasise how out of place the women feel in the Work and Income environment. In Chapter Five, I considered the way that affective responses can be “designed into spaces” (Thrift, 2004, p.68). While the utilisation of Māori language in documents and signage indicates an effort to recognise Māori culture within Work and Income, as I highlighted in that chapter, the physical environment itself is only one aspect of a space that has the potential to generate feelings. The way that events are managed and performed in a place can also contribute to its emotional resonance. Work and Income offices appeared to evoke particularly negative emotions for Māori women who took part in the research. Their descriptions of common Work and Income practices contributed to my analysis in Chapter Five when I proposed that long wait times; insensitive questioning; complex administrative processes; and the unpleasantness of staff all gave an emotional character to the offices that made them very difficult places to visit. It is also clear that for these women the dominance of Pākehā values and norms contributed to the emotional character of these spaces.

### **“Another Māori on the benefit”**

Talk of differential treatment and of being out of place in a Pākehā environment emphasised the lack of value that the women felt accrued to them in the welfare context. My use of the word “value” aligns with Skeggs’ (2004; 2011) notion of “person-value” discussed in Chapter Four, and refers to how, and under what conditions, value attaches to us (or not) in our relationships with others. Feeling devalued in the Work and Income context had much to do with the negative affect that not only attaches to the women as welfare mothers, but as Māori welfare mothers. As noted in Chapter Four, the symbolic welfare mother is lazy, dishonest, spends money meant for her children on cigarettes and alcohol and continues to produce children as a means of securing an income without having to work. It was

also clear from the focus groups with Māori women that they saw this figure as being raced.

Liz Beddoe (2014) proposes that the way poor families are framed in the New Zealand media is both stigmatising and highly racialised often reducing any public sympathy for the poor, and in particular for poor Māori. Discourses of race are intermingled with those of poverty and as a result Māori ethnicity has become linked with welfare dependency in the public imagination. In all of the discussions with Māori women, they talked about feeling constrained by the association of their ethnicity with welfare dependency:

#### **Māori Group (1)**

Hine: I just got off the benefit 'cause people just – oh, it's so horrible how they just look at you like, 'oh, another Māori on the benefit. She's just having kids to stay on the benefit'.

#### **Māori Group (2)**

Chantelle: You hear a lot of bad comments about young mothers being on the benefit for too long, not trying to look for work; things like that. Not just to help them find work. You don't really hear a lot of good things about mothers being on a benefit.

Aria: Also judgmental.

Chantelle: Yeah, there's a lot of judgment that goes on with being on a benefit; and a lot of people look down on you.

...

Grace: Like, on Facebook there's a lot of people on different pages; like buy/sell pages, like dissing Māori people, just saying that they're dole bludgers,<sup>72</sup> spending money on alcohol and drugs and not on their kids. Yeah, just calling them hories<sup>73</sup> and things like that, you see a lot of that on Facebook

Aria: They're just basing their comments on the few people they know 'cause with us, we spend our money on our kids. They don't know us, they don't ask us.

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<sup>72</sup> *Dole* is slang for a welfare benefit. A *bludger* is a slang term referring to someone who is lazy.

<sup>73</sup> Originally a transliteration of the name, George from English to Māori, *Hori* has now become a derogatory descriptor for Māori (Massey Linguists, 2009).

### Māori Group (3)

Frances:

Whenever they say single mothers on the benefit it's most usually Māori single mothers on the benefit or Māori on the benefit ... [what] I always see is Māori mothers on the benefit and that gets drilled into people's heads where you hear people talking and they're like, 'Oh how many kids has she got now? Oh three kids, oh yeah so she's just gonna live in her state house<sup>74</sup> and claim off the benefit for her whole life'. That's quite common for people to talk about people like that and it's always Māori. I never hear white trash<sup>75</sup> or anything; I never hear that. I'm not saying that they are; I have no idea because I don't know, but it's just the fact that that's what I always hear and it sucks.

In the first example, Hine makes it clear that the connection of Māori women with welfare dependency can generate feelings of shame. In the second excerpt, Chantelle and Aria similarly talk about feeling judged when "people look down on you". The women express frustration at comments aligning Māori with discourses of welfare, drug and alcohol dependency, and poor parenting. While Aria may argue "we spend our money on our kids", implicit in her account is the difficulty the women experience disassociating themselves from this alignment. In the final example, Frances proposes that when others refer to single mothers on welfare, they really mean Māori mothers. For her discourses of welfare dependency are inextricably intertwined with racist discourses that link ethnicity to the receipt of welfare. These discourses are reinforced through repetition, they "get drilled into people's heads" making the negative value that circulates and attaches itself to "Māori mothers on the benefit" difficult to shift.

These examples from the three focus groups with Māori women emphasise the negative value circulating around the symbolic figure of the Māori welfare mother in New Zealand. The women refer to an unspecified "they" that appears to encompass people they have met, public figures, and mass and social media. Elsewhere in the

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<sup>74</sup> A *state house* is a form of social housing managed in New Zealand by the government agency Housing New Zealand Corporation.

<sup>75</sup> *White trash* is a derogatory term for those in poverty who are white.

focus groups, women referred to the way they perceived this negative affective value shaping their experiences at Work and Income:

### **Māori Group (1)**

- Hine: [Caseworkers tell you] 'You know you're not allowed to buy alcohol with this green card?'<sup>76</sup> [Laughter] Well, I don't drink. I don't smoke. So cheers thanks. Am I allowed to buy nappies? Like is that [allowed with][Laughter] your food grant. Yeah.
- Hine: That's it. That's what I found is that they always tell you, 'you're not allowed to buy alcohol. You're not allowed to buy cigarettes'.
- Caitlin: Like thank you for telling me that.
- Hine: And I'm like, 'oh yep, 'cause I'm just gonna go and buy that, spend all my food grant money on some alcohol'. Woo hoo
- Kiri: It's like, just for that I'm gonna buy some with my other money [Laughter] that I hid from you. [Laughter]
- ...
- Hine: But that's what it's like you know
- Mere: Yeah. I hate going in there. I hate ringing them.
- Hine: Or they tell you, 'you can't exchange this card for cash'. I'm like I came here for a food grant. Stop this. Like stop it. Stop acting like I'm this//
- Kiri: Ridiculous
- Hine: // emo,<sup>77</sup> I'm not. I'm only here for a food grant for a reason. Yeah.
- Hine: Yeah, and they just make sure that you feel even worse about yourself for going in there.
- Kiri: I know. As if it's not bad enough.
- Caitlin: They honestly shatter you eh? They shatter your confidence. Yeah. Yeah.

### **Māori Group (2)**

- Aria: It just depends on the sort of [caseworkers] you get. The only ones I've ever had – their faces just look like they don't wanna look at us ...

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<sup>76</sup> A *green card* refers to the payment card that Work and Income issue when a Special Needs Grant is approved. Cards are preloaded with funds and can be used to purchase goods from approved suppliers.

<sup>77</sup> *Emo*, a word originating from "emotional hardcore" music, has evolved into an established slang term describing a group with particular tastes in clothes, music and behaviours (Scott & Chur-Hanson, 2008). Here Hine uses it as a derogatory term seemingly to indicate stupidity.

Grace: Like oh another bene bludger.<sup>78</sup>  
Aria: Yeah pretty much.

### **Māori Group (3)**

Danielle: I always felt like [staff at Work and Income] were looking down on me. Didn't really wanna help. Just made me feel – they embarrassed me sometimes. It was like, 'Well have you tried to get a job?' 'Well yeah obviously I have but I have kids' and you know all that kind of stuff and they're like, 'oh so have you got your kids in care?' 'Yeah but I'm still trying to get a job' and I was doing my cleaning for a bit and even with my cleaning I was still getting more money on a benefit than what I was with cleaning and even though I was getting less they wouldn't help me. It just made me feel stink as.

In the first example, Hine notes that case managers will always advise that payment cards are not for the purchase of alcohol or cigarettes. She is offended by the implication that she would apply for a grant for food and then spend the money on something else. This is taken up and expanded by Kiri who jokes that she should then buy alcohol and cigarettes with the money that she has hidden from Work and Income. In doing this she appears to be referencing discourses that constitute welfare mothers (particularly Māori welfare mothers) as dishonest and bad parents. Hine then recounts being told that she cannot exchange the card for cash. She is not out to cheat the system but to feed her family. There is humour throughout the account – the ridiculing of those in authority as noted in Chapter Seven – but the exchange ends soberly. The women may have been able to laugh about their encounters but they acknowledge how they have been affected.

Similar themes mark the other two accounts. Aria comments that the caseworkers she interacts with “don't want to look at us”. Grace provides the rationale; it's because Work and Income staff have cast them as “bludgers”. Danielle repeats a phrase Chantelle used in the account above arguing that she feels if caseworkers are “looking down on me”. Insistence from caseworkers that she search for work implies

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<sup>78</sup> *Bene* is an abbreviation of beneficiary. See also Footnote 72 this chapter.

an assumption that she has not already done so and Danielle finds the implication embarrassing. There is shame in being unable to distance oneself from the symbolic welfare mother with her unwillingness to work, poor parenting skills, and dishonesty. These interactions with staff at Work and Income made the women feel “even worse” about themselves; presumably the “even worse” refers to how bad they felt asking for additional assistance in the first place. The women seem well aware of the practices that determine social value – good parenting, working, independence from the state – yet they are not only lacking value because of their dependence on welfare, but they embody this lack through their ethnicity. It was the impossibility of distancing oneself from this perceived deficit that appeared to make the women’s encounters at Work and Income so challenging.

### **“They’re like scary people”**

As discussed in Chapter Three, I held three interviews with Pasifika women: two groups of two, and one woman who was interviewed on her own. Three of the Pasifika women, Tiresa, Rose and Lei, reported some particularly difficult interactions with Work and Income case managers. The women’s interviews exemplify the way that multiple forms of disadvantage can intersect and shape experiences within the welfare context. These women all spoke English as a second language, came from backgrounds marked with poverty, and had little family support around them. Two of the women had experienced violence in past relationships; one was the mother of seven children.

The accounts of these three women stand out for the very visceral way they were affected by the Work and Income environment. As I have noted previously, the performance of events within a place can add to its affective resonance. The women’s descriptions of their visits to Work and Income offices were shaped by the fear they felt at the prospect of these meetings. All three spoke of being “scared” to go into Work and Income:

### **Pasifika Group (1)**

- Tiresa: [At Work and Income] you would see heaps of faces and people make you scared. [Laughs] I always scared when I enter Work and Income. First I have to look. People they look at me and it's like, 'okay'.
- Rose: For me, I went to the Police Station one day. We went with Tiresa I wasn't even scared. But for the Work and Income [Laughter] I was scared.
- Tiresa: Yeah, I remember that. [Laughter] Because I can tell their faces. Maybe they think, 'oh just go find a job. Don't come here. Blah, blah, blah'. It's not like that. We need help as well.

### **Pasifika Group (2)**

- Lei: For me when I go to the Work and Income, oh man, to be honest I don't like to go back, they're like scary people. [Laughs] Some people is good, some people it's scary, make me angry and it's better for me I just left before sometimes I can't help myself and I just start to swear and I just walk away 'cause it really piss me off. That's why I'm like, like I said it makes me scared, because I think I'm gonna go ask for help and they're gonna help but no they say something that makes me angry. .. When I go inside the Work and Income my mind just says 'oh the scary house' and I'm not happy.

The words “scared” (to describe themselves) or “scary” (to describe the Work and Income staff and environment) were repeated frequently in the interviews. In the excerpt above, Tiresa talks of being scared by the way people look at her. She imagines Work and Income staff thinking “don't come here”. The thought that they will not give her assistance adds to her sense of fear. Lei similarly talks about “scary people” and describes Work and Income offices as “the scary house”. Like the other women she is afraid that she will not receive the help that she needs: “I think I'm gonna ask for help and they're gonna help but no”. Her account of her transformation into anger aligns with the analysis in Chapter Six. As I outlined then, interactions at Work and Income were often described by participants as eliciting anger, but anger that needed to be suppressed in that context. There are consequences to losing one's temper at Work and Income and Lei is aware of these. She describes having to leave before she gets to the stage where she “can't help herself”.

Like other participants who took part in the research, Tiresa, Rose, and Lei similarly noted that they had little understanding of the regulations that determined their entitlements. Of particular concern to these three women was the invasive questioning by caseworkers who they claimed deliberately withheld entitlements or gave them incorrect information. The women's narratives of these interactions were marked by a strong emotional patterning where anxiety and fear regulated their attempts to obtain assistance:

**Pasifika Group (1)**

- Tiresa: Maybe you don't have information and stuff, and it's very difficult to answer.
- Rose: Sometimes they will ask the question that they already know the answer but they will still ask and ask.
- Tiresa: Ask and ask. Going on and on and on.

**Pasifika Group (2)**

- Lei: It's like a scary office [laughs] when you go over there. To be honest when I go there, I don't know if it's a good person or a bad person so how they talk. I think there's something they're not respect sometime when they keep asking questions because I didn't know they have the right to ask that one or not.

In the interviews with these three women, they often returned to the repetitive and invasive questioning they faced from staff at Work and Income. Requests for personal information appeared to make them particularly uncomfortable. They were unsure of the purpose of the information requested, and why they were asked the same questions over and over again. The women queried the relevance of the questions to their claims for entitlement, and so were uncertain if staff members "have the right to ask". This confusion appeared to provoke feelings of anxiety in the Work and Income context. This feeling was related to the women's unfamiliarity with Work and Income processes, but also to the concern that they could inadvertently jeopardise their entitlements by misinterpreting or not being able to answer questions.



Feelings of anxiety seemed to be intensified by a perceived powerlessness in the Work and Income context, and an inability to negotiate with any of the caseworkers they had encountered in the past:

### **Pasifika Group (1)**

- Tiresa: But to be honest, when you go [to Work and Income] you will see the face. Yes, you can tell the face when they look at me, how they talk to me. 'What do you got? What do you want? How can I help you?' Talk like this. It's like, okay, that's make me feel sad and angry sometimes and scared. And then, make me feel like, okay, just leave it. 'It's okay, I will come back next week'. But when I got a social worker and then it will be fine. I know it's easy for me, but when I go by myself, they give me this kind of face and then make me scared and I want to go back [out]. Never come back here.
- Rose : Last year, I remember, I went with my social worker ... because I want uniform for my kids, for my son and some clothes for the little ones. So I went and bought because they said, 'get a receipt from Warehouse'.
- Tiresa: Or anywhere that you can get it.
- Rose: So, I went with my social worker that day and I did get [the receipt] and then she was like, 'well, I think it's too much'. 50, is that too much? 80, is that too much? So I didn't give her the other ones.<sup>79</sup>
- Tiresa: It's okay because she got two kids.
- Rose: I hide it away
- Tiresa: Should be okay. But this kind of words, they give it to us. This kind of face, they give it to us. It make us scared and then don't want to go back there. And then if I had emergency, something like I need a food, then I'll feel like I want to call but no, I don't want to go there.

In this account Tiresa describes how difficult she finds going into Work and Income on her own. The way that caseworkers look at and talk to her makes her feel "sad

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<sup>79</sup> It is not clear which specific grant Rose was applying for but there are several for which she would have been eligible. At the beginning of each year the School and Year Start-up Payment can be used to purchase clothing. Rose would have been entitled to \$400 for her preschool child and \$450 for her school age child. She could also have applied for an advance payment specifically for clothing. In this case she would have been entitled to \$400. Finally, the Advance Payment of Benefit for school uniforms offers up to \$300 for each dependent child.

and angry... and scared". These feelings deter her from asking for help: instead she describes telling herself to "just leave it". Going in with her social worker, however, can give her the confidence not only to visit the offices but also to ask for the assistance she needs. Rose then interjects with her own story. The previous year she visited Work and Income with her social worker. She tells of bringing in receipts for her purchases but being told that the amounts were "too much". Rose reports that she hid the rest of her receipts away feeling too "scared" to negotiate with the caseworker even with her social worker there to support her. Tiresa finishes by reiterating what she said at the beginning of the account, the way staff talk to her and act towards her makes her scared and as a result she often avoids going into the offices even in an emergency.

Ahmed (2014, p.65 *italics in the original*) writes of fear as not just an unpleasant experience, but also involving "the *anticipation* of hurt ... fear projects us from the present into a future". This anticipation impacted on the women's willingness to visit Work and Income offices, and their ability to negotiate when they had no choice but to enter these spaces. As Ahmed (2014) explains:

Fear works to align bodily and social space ... it is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allows spaces to become territories claimed as rights by some bodies and not others. (p.70)

Work and Income allow two applications for Special Needs Grants to be made over the telephone, but any additional requests need to be applied for in person. For this reason, all three women spoke of times they had gone without necessities such as food rather than ask for help. Work and Income offices were hostile spaces that these women would only enter when there was no other alternative – and sometimes not even then. The "uneven distribution of fear" meant that, while other beneficiaries may be able to negotiate these spaces, for the most part these three women managed their fear through avoidance.

### **Intersecting Pasifika subjectivities**

The unevenness of the circulation of fear became very evident when I began analysis of the third Pasifika focus group. The two Pasifika women who formed this group came to the research from very different backgrounds. Both were tertiary educated, spoke English fluently and told of receiving support from their families. These women also recounted a number of challenging experiences with Work and Income, but the affective configurations that marked their accounts were very different:

#### **Pasifika Group (3)**

May: When I first got onto the benefit my son was two years old and I took him to my first and only visit because there are no toys, nothing for him. I asked them about toys and the caseworker said that it's a hygiene reason that they don't have toys. And then I said to her, 'but they have them at the doctor and kids are sick and they just wash them I guess'. But she just said, 'No'. And then I said, 'well, if you can manage me putting my son first and dealing to whatever he needs between asking questions, then that's fine'. But the environment wasn't set up for families.

Claire: And that was your experience as well?

Vailea: Yeah. I guess 'cause May said that she went to the [Office name] branch, when I moved into [the area] that was the branch I went to as well. One comment I have to make about [office name] is the receptionist is really cold and she's really rude. One time I asked her how long the appointment was gonna be – like I always expect when I go to Work and Income that I'll be waiting at least half an hour [Laughter] even though I have an appointment set. [Laughter]

May: Yeah.

Vailea: That's my expectation. And I said I said, 'look, I've gotta go pick up my daughter from pre-school soon', but my appointment was 45 minutes delayed. [The Work and Income receptionist] made a bit of a snarky comment that 'we're all overworked here and they'll come and see you as soon as possible'. I said, 'look, I appreciate that you've got lots of work and stuff but that's not professional'.

May: No.

Vailea: And I've also said things like, 'even though you're Work and Income, you're a service at the end of the day and I'm your customer'.

May: Yeah, that's right.

Vailea: Before this field I worked in hospitality, we had to put up with a lot of stuff from customers [Laughter] but you still have to have your poker face on. And just because you're in a

- authority as such, doesn't mean that you can talk down to me or belittle me. And I'm very vocal and I won't let people make me feel like crap.
- May: Mm that's good.
- Claire: What was the response when you said that?
- Vailea: Oh, she didn't like it. [Laughter] I think everyone's like, 'Oh my gosh, Vailea's coming in; who's gonna have her?'

In this account, the women talk about some of the irritations of visiting Work and Income. They repeat complaints made in other groups: there are no toys for children, they are made to wait for a long time, and staff members treat them rudely. Vailea's account of the receptionist's attempt to disparage her make it clear she is very aware of the negative affect accruing to welfare recipients: people can try to make her "feel like crap" because of the lack of value associated with a welfare identity. Both women are quite adamant, however, that this constitution of them and their subsequent treatment by Work and Income staff is not acceptable and make a point of contesting it. May questions the lack of toys for her son to play with, telling the caseworker that her son will take priority during their meeting. Vailea relates castigating the receptionist who treated her rudely, emphasising that she expects to receive good service at Work and Income. She appears to be proud of the fact that she is "very vocal" and adamant she will resist attempts to "talk down to me or belittle me".

In comparison to the interviews with Rose, Tiresa and Lei, the discussion with May and Vailea was striking for its absence of fear and anxiety. As Ahmed (2014) has noted, fear is a response to feelings of vulnerability rather than to an objective risk. Such feelings are related to past narratives that predetermine objects of fear. For May and Vailea, Work and Income offices and the people who work there do not promote the same emotional response as in other women. Rose, Tiresa and Lei's former experiences have created affective narratives that position Work and Income as a place to be feared because they anticipate they will be treated poorly there. Their interactions with Work and Income now follow a familiar sequence dominated by their fear and anxiety. The other women by contrast may have felt "belittle[ed]"

by their experiences at Work and Income but their affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) is one with resistance at its core.

As I have noted previously, affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) can be related to social encounters that have gone before. The affective practice in all of the Pasifika women's accounts appeared to have been broadly shaped by their past experiences within Work and Income:

**Pasifika Group (3)**

Vailea: One ... [Work and Income caseworker] was really good. I actually went out of the WINZ office feeling great because I felt heard and he understood me. I think he's the person that, maybe not manager, but below. I said to him, 'I just feel so belittled', and, 'What is this?' and 'blah blah blah', and he listened to me. 'Cause I think I said something like, 'I feel really devalued', and he said, 'I'll never forget that you've said that', and he encouraged me that when I get my Bachelor and stuff that I should advocate [for] Work and Income clients.

Vailea relates telling a senior staff member at Work and Income that she felt "belittled" and "devalued". This leads to the staff member commending her and recommending she use her education and experience to advocate on behalf of others. The example demonstrates how Vailea's ability to articulate her concerns, combined with her education, enable her to transform the negative value associated with welfare receipt into an asset and she leaves the offices "feeling great". She continues to be "very vocal" in her demands that Work and Income provide her with "a service".

In contrast Rose and Tiresa have patterns of fear reinforced with every visit. They are unsure of their entitlements, they do not know what caseworkers "have the right to ask", they do not like the way caseworkers look at or talk to them, they are "always scared" and this is all accepted without any outward protest:

**Pasifika Group (1)**

Claire: When you've had problems there, have you ever gone to a manager or complained about anything?

Rose: I don't complain at all.  
 Tiresa: I never complain  
 ...  
 Rose: Sometimes, I heard that you can ask for a different case manager, but I don't think so. I'm too scared to ask.

Unlike Vailea, Rose and Tiresa are not willing to contest their treatment in the Work and Income context. Neither woman had ever complained despite recounting some very challenging experiences. Although Rose acknowledges that it is possible to request a new case manager she "is too scared to ask". The women's everyday affective practice (Wetherell, 2012) at Work and Income – reinforced in every visit they make – is marked by uncertainty and anxiety.

### **"It's hard for us. It's easy for the white people"**

As in the groups with Māori women, during these interviews I included a question to encourage the women to talk about their experiences of being Pasifika in the welfare environment. This manifested as "do you ever think that Work and Income caseworkers treat you a certain way because you are not white?" or "do you feel that Pākehā friends on a benefit are treated differently? Rose, Tiresa, and Lei were adamant that their ethnicity impacted on their engagement with their caseworkers and this added to their feelings of anxiety at Work and Income:

#### **Pasifika Group (1)**

Tiresa: But when there's no one help you, then they will make it difficult and really hard for me to answer and then end up like, 'Oh, just leave it. I want to go home', because it takes half an hour, an hour. But when I saw some other people next to me, Kiwi people, Māori people, they will come like 15 minute gone with their stuff and I was like, 'Okay, what about me? I'm sitting here for half an hour, an hour, still waiting, [they're] still asking questions'.

...

Rose: It's hard for us. It's easy for the white people.  
 Tiresa: It's made me feel angry. What [Pākehā friends] say, 'when we go there, we get everything like this'. But what about me? When I go there, take ages to answer me, to give me the right answer. Then ... 'come back the other week. Come back next

week'. But if my [Pākehā] friend go, it was like this [clicks fingers].

### **Pasifika Group (2)**

- Claire: When you were going into Work and Income do you ever think that they treat you a certain way because you are not white or because you're from//
- Lei: Sometime I think like that. They're not gonna tell me but sometime I think like that. It must be they look at Island people or something like that, look at my colour, I start to hate that people [Laughs]
- Claire: Have you ever had caseworkers that were Pacific people or Māori?
- Lei: No, just Pākehā. Not one of my case managers [was] Māori or Island, it's only Pākehā. I think if I go with an Island, if my case manager is Island or different people must be, I don't know, different or no. But only at this it's only Pākehā [Laughs].

Rose, Tiresa, and Lei explained their difficult experiences entirely in terms of their ethnicity. The women argued that Pākehā caseworkers treated them a particular way because they were Pasifika people, emphasising how little value they felt accrued to them in the Work and Income environment. While this made them angry, it also clearly contributed to their feelings of anxiety in relation to entering Work and Income spaces. They experienced Work and Income offices as being dominated by Pākehā values and norms; being seen as a Pasifika person had little worth. Other New Zealanders who receive welfare – particularly white New Zealanders but also Māori – find it “easy” to get what they need. Lei proposed that Pākehā caseworkers treat Pasifika people differently thinking “the Islander no way no help”. Tiresa’s Pākehā friends get everything they ask for but Pasifika people must wait for weeks and sometimes still not receive a grant. Tiresa is uncertain about the exact reason: maybe she does not explain or talk “properly”; maybe it is because she was not born here. She is however clear on the outcome: for “Pasifika people, Island people” dealing with Work and Income is more difficult.

May and Vailea, in contrast, did not look to their ethnicity to make sense of their dealings with Work and Income:

**Pasifika Group (3)**

- Claire: Do you feel then that Pākehā friends on a benefit, that they were treated differently?
- May: I know [other Pasifika people] bring this up a lot but in my personal experience I don't think so. Maybe because I pretty much grew up here, not that I think of myself as a white person, but I can advocate just as well as a Kiwi person. If someone says something I don't agree with I can speak my mind as well. So I never felt like my culture was an issue because if it was I would have stomped on it so quick, you know; yeah, so you fight that way.
- Vailea: It's funny you say that 'cause if it was a different situation, usually I'd probably be like yes, the culture card is an issue. But I actually agree with you May. 'Cause I was just thinking about different ethnic friends on the benefit. I haven't actually seen that as a – what's the word? I haven't seen cul (oh my gosh, what am I saying?)
- May: Like discrepancies between cultures?
- Vailea: Yeah, yeah. I think it's more in how much education you have when you go in, so what you're entitled to, and how you're going to present your case pretty much.
- May: Yeah, pretty much.

While May and Vailea may have experienced challenges in their dealings with Work and Income, this was not attributed to their ethnicity. Vailea has seen no difference in the way her friends of different ethnicities are treated. The women acknowledged that there were problems with the system, environment and people at Work and Income, but they did not associate this with racism.

Feminist anti-racist theories consider the way that different categories of self intersect (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Mirchandani 2003; Yuval-Davies, 2006). Inequality is seen as multidimensional where it is experienced and contested in shifting configurations. At the time I spoke with them, both May and Vailea were no longer receiving welfare and were working very closely with marginalised Pasifika women. The women witnessed firsthand some of the difficulties their clients experienced in claiming their welfare entitlements:



### **Pasifika Group (3)**

- May: Stress, a bit of language, a bit of understanding as well. Sometimes they feel like the person that they're talking to has no idea about them but is probing them for all this information and the way they talk about [it] is they find it violating. Pacific people that we work with, it's hard for them to open up ...There's a big culture around pride and family values are secretive and stuff. So going to WINZ and having them ask every indecent question about your situation is really hard for them.
- Vailea: And I think also intimidation is a huge factor, not only if I have to think about clients but in my personal life. I've had to really encourage, like, to my friends, to ring up and ask for a food grant is a huge issue for them. 'Oh my gosh, you're gonna ask me all these questions and I'm too scared and they're gonna say no'. Fear of rejection. Fear of what they're gonna ask. They're already anxious so how are they gonna respond to the question. Getting choked up. That's gonna make them think that they're lying.

Like Rose, Tiresa, and Lei, May's clients struggle with English, and perceive some of the questions they are asked to be "violating". She understands that for vulnerable people the experience of claiming entitlements can be "really hard". Similarly Vailea contends that many Pasifika people feel intimidated by Work and Income and become so anxious they cannot provide the requisite information. It was very clear, however, that these are not problems May and Vailea faced when they were receiving their benefits. Their ability to successfully navigate the welfare system meant they were able to obtain the support they needed: as a result these two women did not associate feelings of racial discrimination with the welfare environment. Instead their experiences at Work and Income were explained in terms of their education, and their capacity to "speak my mind". Unlike their clients and friends, May and Vailea "can advocate just as well as a Kiwi person".

Considering the experiences of these five Pasifika women through the metaphor of the affective economy highlights how negative affect can accumulate and, in the process, impact on one's value in the welfare setting. Ethnicity is intertwined with a number of intersecting social divisions such as gender, socioeconomic status,

education, personal history, cultural context, and immigration status. Each of these divisions is associated with value – both negative and positive. May and Vailea identify with categories that increase their “person-value” with Work and Income caseworkers. Rose, Tiresa, and Lei’s accounts, however, emphasise how negative value, can accrue and naturalise ones marginalisation in the welfare environment. As Tiresa acknowledges, “maybe I’m not explain the right thing. Maybe I’m not talking properly. Maybe I’m not a Kiwi”. Negative affect not only “sticks” to Tiresa but has become embodied in her lack of fluency in English, her accent, and the colour of her skin.

## **Conclusion**

My intention in this chapter has been to draw attention to the accounts of Māori and Pasifika women as they made sense of their experiences in relation to welfare receipt. These accounts share remarkable similarities with those of women in the general groups. They too spoke of difficulties with the administration, processes, staff, and the environment at Work and Income. Like women in the other groups, Māori and Pasifika women were critical of caseworkers whom they described as treating them harshly and restricting their access to entitlements. The analysis in this chapter has similarly highlighted the patterns of emotion that run throughout this thesis. Aligning with my analysis in Chapter Six, there was talk of shame and a perception of diminished social value that made the women feel “stink as”. There was also much talk of anger throughout the groups with Māori and Pasifika women. As in the mixed ethnicity groups, discussions of moments of strong affect were used to emphasise the injustices these women perceived within the Work and Income setting.

The stories in these groups, however, diverge in important ways. A number of the women spoke of feeling out of place in the Work and Income environment that they experienced as dominated by Pākehā culture and Pākehā caseworkers. They talked about being treated differently from Pākehā welfare recipients. There was anger not only at the behaviour of caseworkers, but also at the racism they perceived in their

interactions at Work and Income. The women had to contend with being constituted through welfare discourses that shaped the experiences of all participants in the research, and also with the racialisation of these discourses. The accounts in this chapter have an affective resonance that make them particularly powerful as the women emphasise their perception of ethnicity hampering attempts to generate “person-value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011) within the context of welfare. As Hine explained as she imagined the thoughts of a caseworker who denied her a Special Needs Grant; “oh, do I want to give to you? You look a little bit dark for my liking”. The women did not merely feel constrained by ideas of what a welfare mother is, many appeared to feel that they embodied welfare dependency and that this impacted on their capacity to negotiate their entitlements.

This chapter has focused on the way that multiple forms of disadvantage can coalesce and impact the production of “person value” (Skeggs, 2004; 2011). May and Vailea’s talk of successfully negotiating in this environment stands in stark contrast with that of the other women who took part in the Māori and Pasifika groups. While all women spoke of feeling devalued by practices within the Work and Income context, May and Vailea’s narratives emphasise their capacity to respond to these. This chapter highlights that in New Zealand the social division of ethnicity needs to be considered as flexible and shifting rather than constitutive of encounters in the welfare context: discussions of ethnicity cannot be reduced to assumptions about similarities and differences. Above all, the analysis emphasises the complexity of accruing value in the welfare environment, and the way that this in turn can impinge on a person’s capacity to access their entitlements.

## Affect and power

I don't go [to Work and Income] anymore, even if I need food. At the moment, I need a washing machine [but] I told my [social worker] I don't want to go and see them anymore (Rose, Pasifika Group (1)).

In analysing the conversations of groups of welfare mothers as they discussed their experience of welfare receipt, this thesis has emphasised the relationship between affect and power. Uneven relations of power shape the delivery of welfare in New Zealand. These relations were very evident in participants' discussions of attempts to negotiate social value; in their narratives of racism; their descriptions of misunderstanding Work and Income's processes, practices, and entitlements; and from their accounts of interactions with caseworkers. This thesis has demonstrated how negative affect magnifies the uneven power relations inherent within the delivery of welfare in this country and how such relations generate painful emotions.

In this concluding chapter I begin by drawing attention to the way power is embedded within the circulation of discourse, and how welfare discourses constitute lone mothers who rely upon the state for support in New Zealand. Following this is a discussion of the interplay of power and affect in the formation of a welfare subjectivity, and the value of considering emotion as a response to relations of power. I then highlight the practical implications of the research, in particular the difficulties participants experienced in claiming their welfare entitlements. The

chapter finishes by offering some suggestions for future research that could develop the findings of this thesis.

### **Discourse, power, and emotion**

In Chapter One I cited then Prime Minister John Key who explained that the purpose of his government's new welfare policy was to "give [beneficiaries] a kick in the pants when they are not taking responsibility for themselves, their family, and other taxpayers" (Key, 2010). Such rhetoric implies that there are many welfare recipients who do not take responsibility for themselves and their families, and who need to be strongly persuaded to do so.

This statement does not simply suggest that beneficiaries have a personal responsibility to work, but also a social responsibility. Key (2010) implicates other New Zealanders in the discussion: working citizens who contribute more to society through their payment of tax. Further on in the same speech Key (2010) stated:

People who receive a benefit are able to do so only because others are going to work every day, earning a wage and paying taxes. In many cases these are people who are themselves far from well off.

Key's (2010) argument hints at the unaffordability of welfare and the threat of economic insecurity: a reference to the anxiety experienced by many in this country following the 2008 global recession and still a concern at the time of this speech. We must give welfare recipients "a kick in the pants" because they are being supported by people who are "far from well off". Welfare receipt is not only personally irresponsible but may well result in financial distress for other New Zealanders. Welfare recipients must be given "a kick in the pants" because the country can no longer afford to support them.

From a post-structuralist perspective, power works through discourses that constitute and manage subjects. The most powerful discourses in society are those,

such as welfare, with a strong institutional foundation (Weedon, 1996). The introduction of Sole Parent Support, one of the new benefits heralded by John Key's speech, has seen an increased emphasis on participation in paid employment, the application of sanctions for those failing to meet work requirements, and the introduction of sanctions for breaches of social obligations. This benefit, with its concomitant employment and social requirements, aligns with normalising discourses constituting lone mothers as lazy and poor parents. Social sanctions insisting that mothers or expectant mothers meet obligations such as taking part in budgeting, antenatal care or parenting programmes carry with them the implication that welfare mothers are failing in these areas. While the policies implemented through welfare reform determine the resources available, and the methods through which these resources will be delivered, it is these implications that give policy its coercive force. The discursive production of lone mothers has a significant influence on the attitudes and behaviours of New Zealanders.

The women who took part in this research were very aware of the discourses that framed their receipt of welfare. They demonstrated the self-regulation that Hewitt (1991) describes as defining the modern subject. A number of the participants utilised welfare discourses themselves as they critically assessed the behaviours and attitudes of other welfare mothers, spoke of their reluctance to approach Work and Income for support, and expressed embarrassment that they could not provide for themselves and their children. In the focus groups, the women often went to great lengths to account for their financial independence prior to signing up for Sole Parent Support, repeatedly stressing that they had "no other choice" but to apply for a benefit. Their reluctance grew from a desire to distance themselves from those women who "milked the system" or "got pregnant to go on a benefit". Welfare discourse sits alongside neoliberal discourse in the promotion of values such as individualism and independence. As I have argued in this thesis, not only do these discourses work together to normalise certain behaviours, such as participation in paid employment, but also specific ways of feeling. In New Zealand feelings of intolerance and disgust are directed towards those who are unable to demonstrate

economic independence. This inevitably provokes feelings of shame within welfare recipients.

This thesis has also emphasised that women who receive welfare are constituted through discourses that are uniquely gendered. While all who receive Sole Parent Support are impacted by welfare policy that places intense pressure on them to enter paid employment despite their parenting responsibilities, the 8% of men who receive this benefit (Ministry of Social Development, 2017) do not have to contend with cultural expectations of intensive mothering linking the amount of time spent with children to good parenting (Hays, 1996; May, 2008; Perrier, 2013).

Furthermore, as I noted in Chapter One, research has highlighted that lone fathers are rarely subjected to condemnations of their parenting skills or morality (Barker, 1994; DeJean, McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). Within the focus groups women acknowledged the constraining implication within welfare discourses that they were bad mothers. This was reinforced implicitly by the attention to work in welfare policy and at times explicitly by having to contend with children being reprimanded by staff at Work and Income.

### **Welfare, negative affect, and social value**

Within this thesis I have emphasised how the interplay between discourse and emotion works to create a perception of social value. I have argued that negative affective value has a disciplinary function in the welfare environment. Using Ahmed's (2014) metaphor of an affective economy this thesis has demonstrated how difficult it was for the research participants to amass affective capital in the welfare environment. In the analysis I paid attention to strategies through which research participants attempted to accrue affective value in this context. Participants, for example, often emphasised their commitment to paid employment, and argued that previous work-force participation or current part-time jobs constituted them as workers. Often the women utilised the language of the market as they attempted to redefine productivity highlighting the work they did as mothers. My analysis emphasised, however, that welfare receipt has such negative value that women who

rely on welfare cannot easily take up the affective subject positions of mothers and citizens available to many other New Zealanders. The focus group discussions indicated that in the welfare environment affective responses evoked by other aspects of the women's identities were frequently overwhelmed by the negative affect adhering to them as lone mothers reliant upon the state.

The metaphor of the affective economy was an important part of my analysis of the focus groups with Māori and Pasifika women. This thesis has drawn attention to the relationship between ethnicity, gender and social value, emphasising how being Māori or Pasifika may heighten the negative affect associated with being a mother on welfare. A number of the participants noted feeling that their ethnicity impacted on their capacity to access their welfare entitlements. This thesis has also emphasised the emotion work a number of the Māori and Pasifika women spoke of performing as they negotiated their constitution in racialised welfare discourses that appeared to shape their experiences at Work and Income. Ahmed (2014) describes the affective labour involved in racism. This emotional effort involves an ongoing process whereby those who are other must work to counter an "idea" of themselves. Ahmed (2014) writes:

The experience of being a stranger in the institutions of whiteness is an experience of being on perpetual guard: of having to defend yourself against those who perceive you as somebody to be defended against. (p.227)

This notion of being constantly in a defensive state flowed throughout many of the women's accounts. A number of Māori and Pasifika participants described Work and



Income as an environment dominated by Pākehā culture and staff.<sup>80</sup> As a result ethnicity (their own and that of their case managers) was often felt to be an integral factor in the way decisions regarding applications for assistance were made. In this thesis I have highlighted the way that racialised welfare discourses were perceived by participants to influence their interactions at Work and Income, and how this perception was reinforced by a hostile and unwelcoming Work and Income environment. This finding offers a way of understanding how racism is implicated in the delivery of welfare in this country.

My research has also drawn attention to the daily institutional practices that contributed to the unpleasant atmosphere at Work and Income. This thesis suggests that these practices were related to the reproduction of social and political discourses in the localised Work and Income setting. This is what McAvoy (2015, p.31) has referred to as the “political and embodied phenomena of subjectivity”; in this context the lived experience of welfare discourse through common organisational practices such as long waits, a loss of privacy, a lack of information concerning entitlements, and humiliating interactions with caseworkers. The focus group discussions indicated that this subjectivity is emphasised for lone mothers who often have no choice but to take their children into the offices where their parenting is on display. This thesis has demonstrated that those who are seen as the embodiment of welfare discourse have their devalued status reinforced through the everyday administrative routines of welfare.

In this thesis I have also argued that the affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) of caseworkers co-constituted the women’s welfare subjectivity emphasising their lack

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<sup>80</sup> The Ministry of Social Development has made efforts to increase the number of Māori and Pasifika staff employed within the organisation. According to the MSD website 23% of staff are Māori and 13% are Pasifika (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.a). While the Pasifika staff numbers are in line with the percentage of Pasifika people receiving a benefit, as noted in Chapter Three, the percentage of Māori receiving sole parent support as of December 2016 was 48% (Ministry of Social Development, 2017). It is also worth noting that the three most marginalised Pasifika women I spoke to had only ever encountered Pākehā staff. Furthermore while women within the Māori groups spoke of occasions when they had seen a Māori caseworker, they noted that this did not change the fact that “when we’re inside those doors we keep our culture outside” (Kiri, Māori Group (1)). These women appeared to experience Work and Income as an institution informed by Pākehā culture and values.

of value with every disparaging comment and refusal of assistance. For the participants, caseworkers appeared to embody Work and Income as an organisation. The focus group discussions were dominated by scathing descriptions of Work and Income case managers and their treatment of clients. Participants' narratives of interactions with welfare administrators highlighted the difficulty of distancing themselves from the figure of the welfare mother well established in welfare discourses. This figure appeared to follow research participants into the Work and Income offices where requests for assistance often appeared to be interpreted by caseworkers as confirmation, not of need, but of laziness, greed, and ineffectual budgeting skills. The focus group discussions emphasised that these were not arbitrary interactions between individual caseworkers and clients, but were repeated in offices throughout the country. The women's welfare subjectivity was reinforced time and time again within these encounters. In their accounts of having to "beg" for Special Needs Grants participants related having to perform their marginal status in order to gain the assistance they required.

Not surprisingly these experiences evoked intense emotions within the participants. Many of the women spoke of feeling shame in relation to their visits to Work and Income. They also recounted times when shame transformed into anger. In their narratives, however, participants emphasised feeling at an emotional disadvantage within the Work and Income environment. Work and Income caseworkers can, in Frances's words, "speak to me however they want". In contrast, women throughout the focus groups spoke of having to contain feelings of irritation while encountering displays of indifference, disrespect, antipathy, and anger. To gain access to their entitlements the women needed to perform a significant amount of affective labour and manage their emotions. This thesis has emphasised how emotional privilege and disadvantage (Wetherell, 2012) play out in the welfare context. Emotional displays at Work and Income are illustrative of the hierarchy inherent in that context. Work and Income caseworkers can express a range of different emotions, however it appears that clients must work hard to keep their true feelings in check.

### **The transformative potential of affect**

The relationship between affect and power is an integral part of this thesis. Power from a Foucauldian perspective is productive as well as constraining (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000). This thesis has drawn attention to the negative impact of the interplay of power and affect within the Work and Income environment, but it has also highlighted the affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) of the research participants as they responded to power relations within the offices. From the focus group discussions it was clear that these relations at times produced resistance and participants spoke of being affected in a myriad of ways. The findings of this research emphasise that talk of emotion within the focus groups served several important purposes. Narratives of strong affect, Thompson (2006) argues, provide an insight into the circumstances of those experiencing emotion. The women's accounts of being affected by their experiences offered them a way of explaining how it feels to be a client of Work and Income.

The focus group context was crucial to my analysis. Listening to other women talk about intensely affective encounters at Work and Income encouraged similar recollections from other group members.<sup>81</sup> Within the focus groups, participants were able to speak about emotions that were inappropriate at Work and Income. Focusing on this talk of emotion offered insights into the way participants made sense of the welfare environment. In their accounts of crying or becoming angry at Work and Income the women rationalised displays of emotion and emphasised the injustice they felt marked the delivery of welfare. Collective narratives of emotion within the focus groups emphasised just how unreasonable the women found their treatment in the Work and Income context. Inevitably this response called the treatment into question. As Greco and Stenner (2008, p.357) argue "once emotions are acknowledged as not only compatible with, but as an active ingredient of rational action, they also become recognizable as a central factor in political analysis". In drawing attention to the affective reactions of participants, this thesis

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<sup>81</sup> While as Jaggar (1989) points out there is no reason to suppose that women's thoughts are more emotional than those of men, it is culturally appropriate in New Zealand for women to be emotionally expressive and as a result the women in the focus groups may have been more willing to engage in talk of emotion than men in the same situation.

has argued that emotion offered the women a way of responding to practices inherent within the delivery of welfare in this country.

A key finding from my research was the way that negative affect was frequently reworked within the focus group discussions. My analysis has highlighted how sharing accounts of emotional moments at Work and Income served to transform this emotion. As the women discussed their experiences of welfare receipt they often shifted their positioning in relation to the emotions implicated in its delivery. Participants, for example, frequently talked about feeling shame in relation to their reliance upon the state for support, emphasising that this was reinforced by their treatment at Work and Income. Episodes of tears at Work and Income were a common example of an affective reaction that could cause shame. Narratives of tears within the focus groups, however, were not shameful. Rather such descriptions served to emphasise that there was something very wrong with the administration of a welfare system that provoked crying in clients. Negative feelings, as Ahmed (2014) reminds us, are not inherently bad but can move us towards new critical insights. Talking about emotional incidents with others seemed to encourage the research participants to feel differently as they made sense of these events and their role within them.

Paying analytical attention to emotional transformation facilitated an understanding of the way the women's affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) within the group discussions enabled them to feel better, however fleetingly, about their experiences of welfare. This shift in emotion was also facilitated by laughter in the focus groups. The humorous reworking of events frequently seemed to encourage participants to consider these episodes in a different light. At times the laughter was provoked as the women imagined transgressing social boundaries at Work and Income, and I have argued in this thesis that humour offered the women a way of challenging dominant welfare practices. In considering laughter as affective practice (Wetherell, 2012), however, I consider its value not only as a way of negotiating relations of power, but also as a means of transforming negative affect. My analysis emphasised the way that laughing about a situation or an encounter that had been upsetting or

stressful could work to alter the negative feeling that dominated many of the women's narratives.

A reworking of emotion often appeared to change the atmosphere within the groups as it offered participants a new way of feeling about their experiences of welfare. Simply put, as the women talked about intensely emotional moments or laughed about challenging encounters, they often seemed to feel better about these experiences. In an argument that resonates strongly with my own research, Ahmed (2014) proposes:

For ... those for whom the tiredness of repetition in everyday life becomes too much to bear, feeling better does and should matter. Feeling better is not a sign that justice has been done, and nor should it be reified as the goal of political struggle. But feeling better does still matter, as it is about learning to live with the injuries that threaten to make life impossible. (p.201)

Clearly feeling better about struggling to receive one's entitlements from Work and Income does not improve access to these entitlements. Feeling better about an event at Work and Income does little to change the fact that the vast majority of participants' experiences at Work and Income were challenging and likely to continue as such. The discussions, however, appeared to offer the women a respite from the necessity of managing their emotions in the Work and Income context. Moreover, my analysis of the focus group conversations indicated that the shift in feeling that took place during many of the discussions appeared to offer participants a different perspective of their experiences with Work and Income. Often the women would begin to re-evaluate their own role in these encounters. While this thesis has demonstrated the way that affect can intensify relations of power, this finding emphasises that emotional reactions can potentially transform the way people feel about these relations.

### **Research implications**

This thesis has drawn attention to the emotion in welfare discourses and the affective formations that circulate around lone mothers on welfare as they negotiate their entitlements. In doing this it facilitates an understanding of emotion as a disciplinary force within the welfare context. As per the Discussion Guide (Appendix 7), during the focus groups I asked participants to talk about ways in which the media represented lone mothers, and how their friends and family spoke to them about women on welfare in New Zealand. Participants' accounts emphasised their experiences of welfare discourse in mass and social media, how these discourses shaped their relationships with family and friends, and how welfare rhetoric followed them into the Work and Income offices. Many of the women also noted that the negative emotion surrounding lone mothers on welfare meant they had delayed approaching Work and Income for assistance.

While prevailing representations of welfare mothers were a feature of the discussions, the focus groups were largely dominated by talk of the Work and Income environment. Over and over again participants spoke of an aversion to visiting Work and Income offices. Specifically they spoke about problems encountered in the administration of their welfare entitlements, and difficult and demeaning interactions with staff. These everyday interactions within Work and Income formed the bulk of my analysis. In focusing attention specifically on the Work and Income environment my research makes a significant contribution to welfare research in New Zealand. As I noted in Chapter One other research projects with lone mothers in New Zealand have only touched on the impact of welfare delivery as it related to other aspects of the lives of welfare recipients. Paying attention to interactions within the offices enabled me to build on this research in emphasising the myriad of ways welfare mothers are affected by the Work and Income environment. This thesis makes an important contribution to the literature on lone mothers in New Zealand by focusing in-depth attention on their experiences in the welfare environment.

A number of the findings in this thesis broadly align with other research concerning the delivery of means-tested welfare. International research indicates that feelings of shame are reinforced by the administration of many welfare programmes in Western countries (Baumberg, Bell, & Gaffney, 2012; Chase & Walker, 2013; Seccombe, James & Walters, 1998; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). Reports of feeling demeaned, belittled, and not listened to permeate research that has focused on the lived experience of welfare receipt. Similar findings have emerged in studies with New Zealand beneficiaries. Participants in New Zealand research have repeatedly claimed that welfare processes and exchanges with Work and Income staff significantly impact on their feelings of wellbeing (Alternative Welfare Working Group, 2010; Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Ferguson, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2014; Morton et al., 2014; Waldegrave et al., 2011).

In focusing attention on emotion in this context my thesis makes a particular contribution to this literature. Engaging with the relationship between affect and power draws attention to the way that emotion can work to reinforce dominant power structures, and the material consequences this can have for lone mothers who receive welfare. Highlighting patterns of emotional distress involved in the receipt of welfare underlines how ingrained this distress is within the delivery of welfare in New Zealand. The consistency within the participants' accounts emphasises that, in this country, welfare provision is experienced as humiliating, confusing and repressive. Participants in my research spoke of being unable to counter the negative affect that adhered to them within the Work and Income environment with their individual stories of need. They related feelings of fear and shame that limited their capacity to negotiate with caseworkers. They talked about being so overwhelmed by the emotional resonance of Work and Income offices that they minimised the time they spent there. Many of the participants, like Rose in the quotation that opens this chapter, avoided going into Work and Income altogether considerably limiting their capacity to access their entitlements.

A further significant finding of this thesis was that of racism experienced at Work and Income. In all of the Māori groups, participants claimed that racialised welfare discourse shaped their experiences of welfare receipt. They also spoke of feeling out of place at Work and Income: an environment depicted as dominated by Pākehā values and beliefs. Similarly three Pasifika participants described an affective atmosphere within Work and Income offices that made them feel very uncomfortable. For many of the non-Pākehā participants being Māori or Pasifika worked against them with their Pākehā caseworkers. The women described an ongoing effort to negotiate value in the welfare context where they were the embodiment of welfare dependency. These findings indicate that identifying as Māori or Pasifika can have implications in relation to accessing welfare entitlements. This is particularly concerning in light of the assertion made more than 30 years ago by the authors of *Puao te Ata tu* that institutional racism impacted on the capacity of Māori welfare recipients to access their entitlements (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1986). The findings in this thesis indicate that ethnicity still negatively influences interactions within welfare offices in New Zealand.

This thesis emphasises that, for the participants, Work and Income was a very unpleasant place to visit. Over and over again participants described negative interactions with caseworkers who, many contended, deliberately treated them poorly and withheld information about entitlements. Participants described feeling humiliated by processes and practices at Work and Income as they attempted to obtain the support they needed. Many of the women spoke of avoiding visiting the offices despite needing assistance. This has significant implications for the delivery of welfare in this country. My research emphasises the extent to which participants made the decision to go without food and other necessities rather than undergo the humiliation of negotiating with Work and Income caseworkers. This assertion was made many times during the focus groups. The participants were quite clear that shame and degradation at Work and Income were the price they felt they had to pay for welfare assistance. At times, many women made the decision that it was easier to go without rather than to pay this price.



While the findings of this thesis challenge the way that welfare policy is put into practice and delivered in New Zealand, I have also begun to address some of the practical implications of the research. In August 2016, I was contacted by a member of the organisation Beneficiary Advisory Services (BAS) a Christchurch based group that offers advice and to people on benefits and low incomes. BAS had heard about my research from my blog and I was invited to join the Board of Trustees responsible for governance and management of the organisation. As a direct response to the findings in my thesis the organisation has begun producing clear and concise written information regarding entitlements available from Work and Income. Working for this organisation and facilitating a service that provides assistance and advocacy to welfare recipients in their dealings with Work and Income has given me a way of ensuring that at least some welfare recipients receive adequate information about their welfare entitlements.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

There are a number of limitations to this research. The majority of the focus groups were held in Christchurch and there may well be some regional bias associated with this. Furthermore only one focus group was conducted in a rural area. A number of the women who took part in the research had visited Work and Income centres in different locations around the country, and remarked that their experiences were consistently challenging. There was also consistency in the focus groups accounts across the different regions. However, future research could focus on other regions within New Zealand, particularly rural regions, in order to consider if the broad emotional configurations identified in this research are reproduced in Work and Income offices throughout the country.

Three of the Pasifika women who took part in the research reported some complex and challenging interactions with their Pākehā caseworkers. They appeared to be particularly marginalised by their interactions at Work and Income. Like other participants these women described feelings of shame and anger, specifically in

relation to the differential treatment they experienced at Work and Income. Their accounts were, however, also marked by a pervasive anxiety that shaped all of their experiences of welfare delivery. These three women repeatedly spoke of being afraid of their caseworkers and of feeling scared when entering Work and Income offices. In Chapter Three I drew attention to the potential limitations presented by my ethnicity. While, as I noted in that chapter, it is difficult to know how much my being Pākehā impacted on the research, at the very least I believe it was a barrier to putting these women at ease, particularly as they did not speak English fluently. Future interviews with women in a similar situation could be conducted by someone of the same ethnicity and in the participant's native language in order to more fully explore the complexity of the issues faced. The findings also indicate that marginalised Pasifika may have specific needs in relation to welfare provision and a further examination of these needs, with a larger number of participants, is warranted.

The accounts of Rose, Tiresa, and Lei highlight the shifting emotional configurations surrounding inequality and the material consequences of this. As noted, intense feelings of discomfort and anxiety often prevented these women from claiming their full entitlements. The accounts of other Pasifika participants, however, emphasise that while ethnicity can compound the negative affect associated with welfare receipt it cannot be seen as constituting encounters in the welfare setting. This thesis has highlighted an "unevenness of affective practices" (Wetherell, 2012, p.17) amongst participants. This unevenness was particularly apparent in the focus groups I ran with Māori and Pasifika women, where multiple forms of disadvantage appeared to intersect and shape participants' experiences of welfare receipt. Further research could consider exploring and identifying these forms of disadvantage.

There were also a number of women who appeared to be more successful than others at navigating the Work and Income environment. My research focused on the women's experiences of the welfare environment, and a discussion of participants' backgrounds and the social resources they had available to them was beyond the scope of this thesis. Future research could explore how those with access to

different social resources may be able to turn negative affect into something with more positive value. A useful way forward may be to consider Bourdieu's notion of habitus to further develop explanations of affect and value (Loveday 2016; Reay, 2006; 2015; Skeggs, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). Reay (2015, p.16), for example refers to habitus or "social position embodied in bodily dispositions" to consider the lived, affective experience of inequality. She argues that this concept facilitates an understanding of people's ability (or inability) to respond to the social world around them. Future research could contextualise this understanding within a discussion of welfare receipt in New Zealand.

In this thesis I have argued that the affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) of Work and Income caseworkers co-constituted participants' welfare subjectivity. Further research could focus attention on staff at Work and Income. From the focus group accounts the affective routines of case managers and support staff appeared to be firmly established at Work and Income. It could be useful to consider the origins of these practices. In this thesis I have also drawn attention to the disproportionate number of Pākehā caseworkers employed by Work and Income New Zealand and the implications this had for a number of the participants. Another consideration could be the socioeconomic backgrounds of frontline staff. Wetherell (2012, p.111), for example, has noted the association of certain "affective styles" with different groups within society. Referring to research by Skeggs (2004) and Reay (2005), Wetherell (2012) notes that a strong commitment to neoliberal values sees the white middle classes reproduce these values throughout the various locations they occupy. Future research could pay attention to the interplay of factors such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status and the way these come together to shape caseworkers interactions with their clients.

Finally one of the findings of this thesis has been that waves of shared affect seemed to catch the attention of those in the focus groups and in the process encourage them to feel differently about themselves and some of their more difficult experiences in the welfare environment. In this thesis I drew attention to the way that positive affect within the focus groups at times overwhelmed the negative

feeling the women brought with them from their interactions at Work and Income. Future research could evaluate how long this positive affect lasted and if it moved with the women beyond the focus group context.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has highlighted the way that groups of women receiving Sole Parent Support talked about being managed and disciplined by the welfare environment in New Zealand. My main focus has been on the point where welfare discourse, policy and practice collide: within Work and Income offices. In considering the way research participants were affected as they made sense of their experiences of welfare receipt, this thesis draws attention to the role that emotion plays in the delivery of welfare in New Zealand today.

My interest in emotion came about from a desire to investigate dominant ways of feeling about welfare, and those who rely upon it in New Zealand today. This thesis indicates that the discursive figure of the welfare mother followed participants into the welfare environment. Considering emotion in the participants' descriptions of Work and Income offices facilitated an understanding of how oppressive they found these spaces. Many of the women's accounts included intense descriptions of fear, shame, anger, and – for non-white participants – racism as they moved through the process of collecting their benefits. By focusing on emotion, this thesis has emphasised how negative feeling impacted on participants' willingness to visit Work and Income offices, and their capacity to negotiate their entitlements. The thesis has highlighted the disciplinary role of emotion in the Work and Income environment. It emphasises that affectively laden discourses and practices can have material consequences. This has significant implications for the provision of welfare in New Zealand today.

There was little positivity in the participants' discussions of welfare receipt. The delivery of welfare in New Zealand appears to be both difficult and demeaning. In paying attention to participants' talk of emotion and their laughter, however, I was

able to consider the way that moments of shared affect offered the women in the focus groups a way of transforming the negative feeling that dominated their experiences at Work and Income. This transformation does not amount to political change but it does emphasise how such moments had the potential to make the women feel better about difficult situations at Work and Income. Focusing analytic attention on these affective moments has suggested a way that emotion can provide a reprieve, however brief, from the oppressive experience of welfare receipt in New Zealand today. This thesis has found that the transformative capacity of affect offered the women in the research an alternative to the emotions provoked by welfare receipt, and potentially a new way of feeling about themselves.

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## **List of Appendices**

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- Appendix (2) Letter to Agencies
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- Appendix (4) Information Sheet
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## Appendix (1) Ethics Approval Letter



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen  
Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

Ref: HEC 2014/12

2 May 2014

Claire Gray  
Human Services & Social Work  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Claire

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 1 May 2014.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. MacDonald'.

Lindsey MacDonald  
*Chair*  
*University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix (2) Letter to Agencies



### Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand

I am contacting you to ask for your help. I am working towards a PhD in Human Services at the University of Canterbury. The working title of the project is *Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand*. As part of my thesis, I am undertaking research with women on *Sole Parent Support*. I am particularly interested in hearing from these women about their experiences on a benefit and their experiences with other people (including staff at Work and Income) concerning their Work and Income entitlements.

I understand that your agency works with women who may be on *Sole Parent Support*. I am hoping that you will be able to assist me in recruiting for this project either by passing on an information sheet or allowing me to talk to your clients about the project before or after one of your parenting programmes.

The women will be invited to join in a focus group discussion made up of five to seven participants. The discussions will take approximately one to one and a half hours and refreshments will be served at the beginning. All participants will be offered a koha to thank them for their participation. I will audio record the focus groups and take some notes. The recording will then be transcribed and participants will have the opportunity to review the transcripts.

I believe that the results of my research will be useful for organisations offering services to beneficiaries so regardless of your ability to assist me, please don't hesitate to get in touch if you are interested in seeing a summary of the results.

I will phone you to discuss if you are in a position to help with this. In the meantime if you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on 021 252 1943 email: [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or my supervisors: Dr Jane Maidment ([jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz)) or Dr Tiina Vares ([tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz)).

Kind Regards

Claire Gray

## **Are you receiving Sole Parent Support?**

**If so you are invited to participate in the following research project:**

### **Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand**

My name is Claire Gray and I am a PhD student in the School of Language, Social and Political Science at the University of Canterbury. As part of my thesis, I am undertaking research with sole parents about what it is like to be on a benefit. The working title of the project is *Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand*. I am particularly interested in your experience of being on a benefit and experiences with other people (including staff at Work and Income) concerning your entitlements from Work and Income.

#### **Your involvement**

Your involvement in this project will consist of a focus group discussion with approximately five other sole parents that will take approximately one to one and a half hours. I will audio record the focus groups and take some notes. The recording will then be transcribed and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript.

You will receive a \$50 Pak N Save voucher in recognition of your time.

In addition the results will be made available to agencies offering services to beneficiaries as I hope that the research will identify useful strategies for women on benefits.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions please text me on 021 252 1943 or email: [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)

## Appendix (4) Information Sheet

**You are invited to participate in the following research project**

### **Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand**

Poapoa me te Hauora ki Aotearoa

My name is Claire Gray and I am a PhD student in the School of Language, Social and Political Sciences at the University of Canterbury. As part of my thesis, I am undertaking research with women who are sole parents about what it is like to be on a benefit. The working title of the project is *Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand*. I am particularly interested in your experience of being on a benefit and experiences with other people (including staff at Work and Income) concerning your entitlements from Work and Income.

#### **Your involvement**

Your involvement will consist of a focus group discussion with approximately five other sole parents that will take approximately one to one and a half hours.

There will be focus groups held specifically with Māori and Pacific women and run by Māori and Pacific facilitators. Please let me know if you would like to take part in one of these groups.

I will audio record the focus groups and take some notes. The recording will then be transcribed and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript. You can also indicate on the consent form if you would like a summary of the findings when they are available. You can withdraw from the project at any time, including withdrawing any information you have provided, up until analysis of the data has begun.

You will receive a \$50 Pak N Save voucher in recognition of your time.

#### **Confidentiality**

A Māori researcher will have access to the Māori focus group data during the analysis. An independent transcriber will also transcribe the data. These people along with the focus group facilitators will be required to sign confidentiality forms.

All participants will be required to sign a consent form agreeing to keep confidential any information discussed during the focus groups.

Completed theses are made available in the University of Canterbury library and can be accessed electronically via the University of Canterbury Library website. It is also my intention to submit a number of journal articles for publication. Your name will not be used and nothing will be published that could identify you. The written transcripts and interview

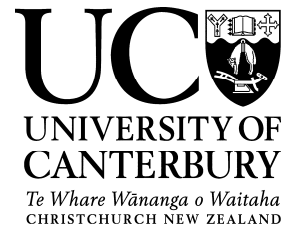
files will be stored electronically and password protected. Research records will be stored for the required ten years and then destroyed.

**Benefits**

The results of the research will be made available to agencies offering services to beneficiaries. I hope that the research will offer some insights into the experiences of women on benefits that agencies may draw upon when designing programmes to offer support to sole parents.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions please text me on 021 252 1943, email me [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or contact one of my supervisors: Dr Jane Maidment ([jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz)) or Dr Tiina Vares ([tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz)).

## Appendix (5) Information Sheet for Pasifika Participants



**You are invited to participate in the following research project**  
**Stigma and the provision of welfare in New Zealand**  
Poapoa me te Hauora ki Aotearoa

My name is Claire Gray and I am a PhD student in the School of Language, Social and Political Sciences at the University of Canterbury. As part of my thesis, I am undertaking research with women who are sole parents about what it is like to be on a benefit. I am particularly interested in your experience of being on a benefit and experiences with other people (including staff at Work and Income) concerning your entitlements from Work and Income.

### **Your involvement**

Your involvement will consist of a discussion with me and a social worker from Pacific Trust.

I will audio record the discussion. You can withdraw from the project at any time, including withdrawing any information you have provided, up until analysis of the data has begun.

You will receive a \$50 Pak N Save voucher in recognition of your time.

### **Confidentiality**

An independent transcriber will transcribe the data. She has signed a confidentiality form.

Completed theses are made available in the University of Canterbury library and can be accessed electronically via the University of Canterbury Library website. It is also my intention to submit a number of journal articles for publication. Your name will not be used and nothing will be published that could identify you. The written transcripts and interview files will be stored electronically and password protected. Research records will be stored for the required ten years and then destroyed.

### **Benefits**

The results of the research will be made available to agencies offering services to beneficiaries. I hope that the research will offer some insights into the experiences of women on benefits that agencies may draw upon when designing programmes to offer support to sole parents.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions please text me on 021 252 1943, email me [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or contact one of my supervisors: Dr Jane Maidment ([jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:jane.maidment@canterbury.ac.nz)) or Dr Tiina Vares ([tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz)).



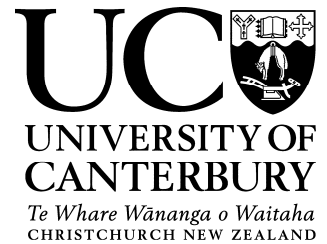
## Appendix (6) Demographic Data<sup>82</sup>

Age	Ethnicity	No.of Children	Age of Children	Length of Time on Benefit
47	Pakeha	2	17, 14	10 years
22	NZ/ Maori	1	2.5	3 years
25	Pakeha	1	4	4 years
25	NZ European	1	4	4.5 years
25	NZ European/ Maori Ngai Tahu & Te Ati Awa	1	5	4 years
26	NZ European	2	6, 4	4 years
38	Pakeha	1	16 months	6 months
26	Euroasian	1	15 months	1 year
42	Indian	1	11	3 years
19	European	1	8 months	1 year
36	NZ European	4	15, 12, 10, 9	2 years
36	NZ European	2	10, 5	4 years
21	Maori	1	3 months	3 years
21	Ngai Tahu/ Kai Tahu Ngati Awa	2	3, 3 months	10 months
21	Kiwi	1	3	3 years
32	European	2	15, 11	On/ off
25	Kai Tahu/ Rongomai wahine	2	6, 2	5 years
40	NZ/ Samoan	4	17, 5,5	14 years
35	Kiwi	2	10, 6	On/ off 10 years
41	Pakeha/ Kiwi	1		22 months
40	Samoan/ European	2	9, 4	3 years
25	Maori Te Rarawa	2	6, 4	6 years
32	Kiwi European	3	6, 5, 3	4 years
27	NZ Pakeha	3	8, 6, 4	2 years
32	European	5	10, 8, 5, 3, 4 months	8 years
40	European	2		Long time
21	European	1	14 months	4 years
26	Pakeha	1	7	7 years
31	Ngai Te Rangī, Ngati Ranginui	4	6, 5, 2, 19 months	On/ off since 2001
28	Maori Te Whanau-a-Apanui Tuwharetoa	2	10, 4	10 years
21	Te Arawa	1	6 weeks	9 months
18	Maori			1 month
19	Maori/ Samoan	2	1.5 & 5 months	1.5 years
	Te Arawa	1	16 months	1 year
36	Peruvian	3	14, 11, 2	6 months
34	European	1		3.5 years
40	NZ/ European	1	2, 4 months	2 years
39	Pakeha	4	18, 15, 7, 6	10 years
37	English/ European	1		18 months
40	New Zealander	1	8	1 year
40	NZ/ European	2	11 (twins)	10 years
34	Pakeha	3	17, 4, 2	2 months
41	NZ	1	6	11 months
23	European	2	5, 3	5 years
40	European	3	16, 14, 13	Approx 20 years
36	Pakeha	1	2.5	8 months
46	NZ European	1	6	1 year 8 months
26	Pakeha	4	8, 5, 17 month old twins	8 years
23	NZ European	1	1	4 years
27	NZ European	1	4.5	2 months (prev. 1 year)
48	European	1 (grandchild)	4	3 years
24	Maori/ Samoan/Kiwi	2	2, 10 months	2 years
27	Ngai Tahu, Ngati Porou	2	5, 3	On/off since age 16
46	European	1	16	16 years
32	Kiwi	2	6, 2	3 years
52	Kiwi	1	15	15 years
35	Pakeha	2	7, 4	3 years
57	NZ Maori	1		20 years (always worked part time)
48	Ngatihua	1	14	14 years
57	NZ Pakeha	2	13, 12	5 years
27	Samoan	2	4,5	5 years
27	Samoan	1	3	1 year
37	Tongan	7	14, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 9 months	4.5 years
30	Tongan/ Maori Tuwharetoa/ Ngai Tahu	1	6	2 years
25	Samoan	1	6	5.5 years

<sup>82</sup> Ethnicity was self-reported. A number of Māori participants chose to identify iwi (tribal) affiliations. All responses of New Zealand, New Zealand European, European, or Kiwi were coded as Pākehā. I acknowledge that this is not unproblematic and that there is a lack of agreement over the term used to describe the dominant ethnic group in New Zealand.

## Appendix (7) Consent Form

Claire Gray  
PhD Candidate  
Human Services Programme  
Department of Human Services and Social Work  
School of Language, Social and Political Sciences  
University of Canterbury  
Tel: +021 252 1943  
Email: [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)



### CONSENT FORM STIGMA AND THE PROVISION OF WELFARE IN NEW ZEALAND Poapoa me te Hauora ki Aotearoa

I have read and understood the information sheet for the above-named project. I agree to participate in the project and I consent to publication of the results of the research with the understanding that my anonymity will be preserved. I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time, including withdrawing any information I have provided, up until analysis of the data has begun.

I also agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed during the focus group session.

I would like to see a copy of the transcript. Yes [ ] No [ ]

I would like to see a summary of the results. Yes [ ] No [ ]

Signed: .....

Contact Details: .....

.....

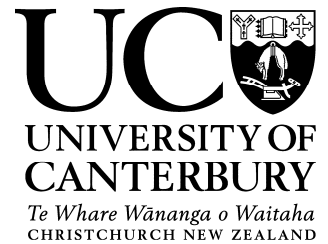
.....

Date: .....

**Note: if you have answered "Yes" to either of the questions above, please ensure contact details are provided.**

## Appendix (8) Questionnaire

Claire Gray  
PhD Candidate  
Human Services Programme  
Department of Human Services and Social Work  
School of Language, Social and Political Sciences  
University of Canterbury  
Tel: +021 252 1943  
Email: [claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:claire.gray@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)



### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### STIGMA AND THE PROVISION OF WELFARE IN NEW ZEALAND

Poapoa me te Hauora ki Aotearoa

Please advise:

Your age:

Your ethnicity/ iwi affiliation:

The number of children you care for and their ages:

How long you have been receiving a benefit:

## **Appendix (9) Discussion Guide**

- 1. Benefits and stigma**  
**What do you hear in the media about mothers on Sole Parent Support?**
  - How do you feel when you hear this?
  - If you had the opportunity how would you respond?
  
- 2. Experience of going on a benefit**  
**What do you remember about when you first decided to apply for a benefit?**
  - How did you feel about going on a benefit?
  - What did your friends or family say to you about it?
  
- 3. Being on Sole Parent Support**  
**Have you ever had any experiences of people treating you a particular way because you are on a benefit?**
  - Do you tell people that you are on a benefit?
  - Do people talk to you about being on a benefit? What sort of things do they say? How does this make you feel? How do you respond?
  
- 4. Experiences at Work & Income**  
**What is it like going into Work & Income offices?**
  - What are the people like?
  - What are the offices like?
  - How do you feel about your visits there?
  
- 5. Social Supports**  
**Do you spend time with other people who also receive a benefit?**
  - Can you think of times when you have been helped or supported by others on a benefit?
  - How useful is the support you receive from other people on benefits?
  
- 6. What helps?**  
**What advice would you give to someone who was about to go on Sole Parent Support?**
  - What advice would you give to a new applicant going into Work and Income?
  - What other advice would you give them?

